THE DEVIL

MOLNAR

VAN WESTRUM

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THE DEVIL

Founded on Ferenc Molnar's Play, as produced by Harrison Grey Fiske at the Belasco Theatre, New York

BY

ADRIAAN SCHADE VAN WESTRUM

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THE DEVIL

This novel is based upon the authorized version of the play, made direct from the Hungarian, and is published by arrangement with the translator and adapter, Alexander Konta and William Trowbridge Larned, and with Harrison Grey Fiske, who controls the acting rights.

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
	Prologue	9
I.	Sandor Tatray	33
II.	Enter—The Devil	64
III.	The Devil's Strategy	87
IV.	The Devil's Tactics	100
V.	The Devil's Parable	132
VI.	The Voross Ball	157
VII.	The Devil in Society	178
VIII.	The Devil's Pawns	202
IX.	The Devil's Mantle	227
X.	The Devil's Letter	251
XI.	The Devil's Wisdom and Woman's	274
XII.	The Devil's Victory	300

PROLOGUE

AT MONTE CARLO

THE halls of the Casino at Monte Carlo were crowded, for it was the height of the season. Every table had its full complement of seated players, and behind them the later comers, forming a bank of gaily colored gowns and soberer coats. The *croupiers,* expressionless, observant, deft, kept uttering their monotonous, "*Faites votre jeu, messieurs! Faites votre jeu!*" The vista of course was quiet, as always, with its heavy gilding under the tempered light; and beneath the quiet, not over it, brooded the intense unrest of a passion, the more intense because always kept in control.

Sandor Tatray staked again, and lost. He had been losing ever since his entrance, after lunch, losing, perhaps, because it was so all-important for him to win. He glanced at the *croupier* who raked in the gold, and—was it

possible? the man smiled at him encouragingly. Sandor looked again.

The man was evidently a Southerner—an Italian, a Spaniard, a South American, a Greek, perhaps, or a countryman of his own—a Hungarian. He had a sardonic face, smooth-shaven, its complexion a yellowish olive. His eyes were black as coal, circumflexed by arched brows of a dead black, like his hair, which was parted in the middle and sharply brushed back, leaving a point in the centre of the forehead. The point led down to a hooked nose, and that to a long, sharp chin. An evil face it was, evil with the understanding of the passions and weaknesses of others, evil with the knowledge that holds aloof.

The *croupier* smiled again briefly, almost imperceptibly. Sandor risked his last *louis—rouge, impair et manque.*

He lost again. When he got up, relinquishing his seat to a woman in a picture hat, gorgeously bejeweled, with eager eyes and flushing cheeks, a woman intent now upon her own weakness, not upon that of others, which had furnished

her the means to gratify its cravings. *Pardon, Madame,* he murmured mechanically, and *Merci, Monsieur,* she answered, jeweled purse in hand, her mind already intent upon colors and numbers.

Sandor slowly made his way to the vestibule, and thence to the vast terrace, towering over the blue Mediterranean, shimmering in the sunlight, among the flowers and the palms and the greenery of this garden spot on earth. Its beauty appealed not to him just now—to him the artist, the lover of color, of beauty in all its forms.

So here he was, and this was the finish. He had reached the end of his rope at twenty-five, by his own act, in three brief days, just as he had set the first foot on the path of success, just as the world of art—the narrower world of judges and connoisseurs, whose judgment the wider world always follows sooner or later—had set the seal of its approval upon his work.

He had talent—great talent. He had always known it; now he had been told officially. But a week ago he had won his first medal, in Paris,

too. But a week ago—and now! The money that his friend and patron in Budapest had lent him to finish his studies,—oh, yes, he knew that he had still much to learn,—the money that was to take him to Munich and Rome and Amsterdam and the Prado had gone to swell the dividends of the stockholders of the Palace of Chance behind him. Laszlo Vöröss, prosaic, middle-aged business man, a speculator of commerce who frowned upon gambling with the conscious virtue of the great, solid merchant, would never forgive him. That he knew.

Sandor pulled out his silver cigarette case, lighted a cigarette, threw the match out into space, and folded his arms.

Que faire? he muttered in the French that during the last two years had become more familiar to him than his native tongue. *Que faire?*

He had not done with life. This he knew quite well. The love of it filled his youthful veins with ardor, the desire of its fulness burned in his heart, but—his career was crippled. He could go back to the city on the

Donau which he had left with such high hopes, he could paint pot-boilers,—he might do quite a little trade in old masters made to order: the shops of a continent called for them, ever more of them for innocent collectors from beyond seas,—he need not return to the drawing lessons from which Vöröss had rescued him, but—the contrast!

He had dreamt of other things. Of a palace of art to dwell in, like Makart's or Alma Tadema's, of portraits of beautiful women, the flower of the aristocracy of his country. He had dreamt of his masterpiece, the picture of the well-beloved about whose identity future generations would speculate, marveling the while at the love-light in her eyes. He had dreamt of all the distinction, the honor, the grandeur, the sensuous pleasures of a prince of art, whose name is carried from continent to continent, revered as that of a conqueror or a statesman, sure of immortality as theirs. And through it all had flitted visions of the tribute that beauty pays to the conqueror of life—the master.

Ah, well, it was over, thanks to his own folly. And now he must face a future of mediocrity, of middle-aged Bohemianism, which means unorderly habits, threadbare clothes and indifferent food, a jaunty face put upon a bad business —an old age of indigence, and then oblivion.

Sandor made a rapid mental calculation. Yes, he had his return ticket to Paris, and enough in the bank there to carry him back to Budapest. As for the woman who had led him into this scrape by her extravagance—well, she must take care of herself. She was used to doing this, and did it well. He smiled grimly to himself. "The woman tempted me," he said.

A little color had crept into his handsome dark face, with its large brown eyes, its finely cut nose and cleft chin. He buttoned his frock-coat, with its jaunty white flower, tightly around him, gave his moustache a defiant twist upward, and turned to go.

There, confronting him, dressed with exquisitely quiet good taste, stood the *croupier* who had raked in his gold pieces—no, it was not he—yes, it was—was it? No, decided Sandor

at last. This Stranger resembled the other man in a general way, but, now that he looked closely, he saw the difference. The likeness lay only in the greenish yellowness of the complexion and in the sardonic curl of the corners of the mouth.

This man was a *magnat*—a *cavalier*. Sandor, in whom, as in all his countrymen of the lower middle class, respect for the aristocrat was deeply rooted, mentally repeated to himself these Hungarian and Austrian equivalents of the word. The Stranger looked, on closer inspection, like some *grand seigneur* incognito, a member of a royal house, perhaps. One meets all kinds of people at Monte Carlo, drawn by a common magnet.

The Stranger smiled pleasantly.

"Pardon my intrusion," he said, with the quiet assurance of a man sure of his station, who addresses on socially equal ground a social inferior, "pardon my intrusion, but I could not help watching you a little while ago at the tables. I was sitting quite near you."

That accounts for the fancied resemblance,

said Sandor to himself: I must have got him mixed up with the *croupier*. He lifted his hat, and bowed.

"Am I wrong," continued the Stranger, "in assuming that you plunged rather too heavily?"

Sandor flushed painfully, a hasty word on his lips.

"Pray, hear me out," continued the Stranger, hastily, holding up his right hand, whose long, tapering fingers caught the artist's attention.

"I am much older than you are," continued the unknown, with unmistakable breeding and a no less evident desire to conciliate—"much older than I look. I have seen much of this world. It is my hobby—I might say it is my business—to observe people and drawn conclusions."

"Monsieur is perhaps connected with the Casino?" asked Sandor, with unpleasant intent.

"Young man"—the reply was given with impressive dignity—"in the place that claims me I am the master, undisputed. It is my realm, my own. Its affairs are far larger, and more enduring, than the bungling little enter-

prise in there. Believe me, I mean to be your friend. Will you listen?"

The Stranger took his right elbow in his left hand, and caressed his long, pointed chin with his right. His coal black eyes gazed quietly at the painter from deep, dark sockets under the arched, finely pencilled eyebrows.

"Pardon me," said Sandor, surrendering to an influence which he felt but could not define. "I was very rude. But believe me, I am terribly upset."

"Now we understand each other." The Stranger took out a golden cigarette case, on which Sandor saw a princely crown and an undecipherable monogram, and lighted a long and fragrant cigarette.

"You see," he continued, "now we have returned to our starting-point, all misunderstandings have been eliminated, and you have acknowledged that I am right. I never make mistakes; that's what gave me courage to speak to you, Sandor Tatray."

The artist gave a start.

"You know me?" he asked, much surprised.

"Oh yes," I know you," replied the other, turning from faultless French to equally impeccable Hungarian. "You see, my dear sir, in my leisure hours, which are scant, I am a lover of art—if I may boast, a connoisseur, a discerning collector, and a patron of young talent."

Here he bowed with inimitable grace and dignity. A court sword, ruffles and a golden snuff-box would have graced that bow much better, the painter's trained eye discerned.

"When I speak of young talent," continued the cultivated voice, "I mean you. Oh, I am no stranger in Paris. I may say that I am no stranger in any of the capitals of the world. But to our affair, since you consent that I shall make it mine as well as yours."

Here he glanced questioningly at Sandor, who bowed but did not speak. The painter was, in fact, nonplussed. Of this distinguished stranger's kind intention he could no longer doubt, but why—why? The whim of an august personage taking his vacation incognito? A philanthropist finding work to his hand? A

collector bent on making a sharp bargain with a promising talent in need? Sandor gave it up. He began to have a kindly feeling, however, for this courteous gentleman, who was so tactful, so considerate, so patient.

"Well, sir," he said at last (the respectful address fell from his lips almost unconsciously), "well, sir, since you seem to know so much, I may as well own up. Yes, it is true. I have made a mess of my life in three short hours. All I can do now is to go to the Devil."

"Ah, the inexperience of youth," smiled the Stranger. "And so you think you are going to the Devil because you have gambled a little—only a little more than you could afford—and believe that you will have to take to painting pot-boilers, or perhaps will have to go back to giving drawing-lessons. Pray, what profit would there be to the Devil in your sinking to obscure mediocrity? That way drab virtue lies, my young friend. The sins of the poor! Do you think that they give him pleasure? They are absolved of them by their clergy before they die, and with reason. They are rarely

great enough to be worth the Devil's while."

Sandor looked up in astonishment.

A grin passed over the Stranger's features, and was gone in a flash, leaving only the sardonic smile at the corners of the mouth.

"You are astonished to hear me speak like that? Well, it's true; I have strange fancies, and perhaps the strangest of all is the way I feel about the Devil. People know him so little, and misunderstand him so much. You see, Monsieur Tatray, it seems to me that the Devil is too powerful a personage, and has too important affairs in hand, to bother about the little sins of the obscure mass which may some day fill the dark corners of his realm, suffering as little as it has sinned. A Russian grand-duke, now—there's game for him; or an English statesman who sends thousands of children to their graves for the sake of a peerage; or a financier robbing the widow and the orphan; but the poor, why, he cannot possibly be interested in them. There is a theory, I believe, that he has hosts of inferior imps to attend to the small fry. Perhaps that's true. I have observed that

mankind occasionally stumbles upon some eternal verity.

"But pardon this whimsical reflection. Everyone has his hobbies—for example, a love for speculating upon strange topics. Another of my hobbies is art, and the encouragement of young artists. And still another is to see to it that young people are not mistaken when they say they are going to the Devil. It makes them feel important, when in reality they will never get farther than his lowliest substitute assistant-deputy. Going to the Devil means the fulness of life, of its pleasures and its pomps, not their denial. However, now I will stop. You have borne with my hobby most patiently."

The Stranger smiled amiably. In fact, he beamed upon Sandor with affection.

"On the contrary," replied the young man, "you have greatly interested me. These are new ideas to me."

"So much the better, then. Now to return to our muttons, as they say in dear Paris. You have lost the money destined for your studies.

You are in a hole—a little hole, which you believe to be a bottomless pit on earth. I am going to prove to you that this is not so by pulling you out, easily, with one hand, like this."

He held out his hand, filled with gold. It glittered as no gold had ever glittered in the young man's eyes, sparkling in the sun as if there were brilliants of purest water among the yellow. Sandor looked at it, attracted, fascinated—he who had always needed it so much, but had never yet cared for money except as a means to the fulfilment of his artistic aspirations. It intoxicated him; for the first time in his brief life he saw in it the key to all that the world offers and asks payment for.

The soothing, persuasive voice came to him from afar, as through a rosy, gilded sunrise haze in a dream.

"Gold," it said. "The cure of little ills, the palliation of great ones, the solvent of all troubles. Phantom and reality, tempter and savior, blessing and curse! It buys loyalty, it buys hatred; it sweetens and it embitters; it unites the loving and lures the wife from her

husband's side; it conjures up beauty and engenders ugliness, cause of envy and crime. It shrivels up the souls of those who are its slaves, and kills the souls of those who are its masters! The second of my allies, dear to me, but the first of them is Love!"

Sandor gazed at the glittering gold in a state of hypnotic intensity, following the sparkling rays it threw off into the blue sky, over the parapet across the blue Mediterranean, back into the windows of its Temple. Then the vision faded. He came to himself with a start. The stranger was gazing at him meditatively, his left hand supporting his right elbow, his right hand softly caressing his long, pointed chin.

"Why—why," stammered the artist.

"I was just saying, Monsieur Tatray, that, if you would permit me, I would help you out of the very shallow little hole into which you had stumbled. Let me be your banker. A little loan, you return to the tables, win back what you have lost, and go back to your studies. What could be simpler? I render you a trifling

service, and you give me a very real pleasure. Shall we say, yes?"

"But—but suppose I lose again?"

"In that case you shall paint my picture. Many great artists have painted me, but none has ever succeeded. They all paint me too dark, I say—do not know how to place me in the right light, have no idea of the background that suits me best."

"It's just like those confounded poets," he added under his breath, "always misrepresenting me. Literary tradition, I suppose."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Sandor, who had not understood.

"Pardon me, I was only grumbling. Now we have arranged our little affair, have we not? You will let me lend you the money to repair your losses. If you win, you pay me back; if you fail, you paint my picture. You see, I stand to lose nothing in either case."

"Thank you, yes; I will accept your offer with much pleasure."

The Stranger drew out a well-filled wallet, and took from it a handful of bank notes. San-

dor, who had expected another sight of the magic gold, felt puzzled. Had he really seen it in the Stranger's hand—or what?

"Shall we say ten thousand francs?" asked the friendly voice.

"Yes, thanks; whatever you think."

He took the notes, folded them, and put them into his pocket. When he looked up again the Stranger had disappeared.

The painter remained in the deserted terrace a little longer, gazing out across the sea, no longer with unseeing eyes. Hope had returned to him, life smiled again upon him. There was to be still another chance for him. He reviewed again all the hopes, the aspirations, tumbled into ruins a short hour ago, now rearing the pinnacles of their fairy structure higher and prouder than ever. Success yonder, emerging from the subtropical greenery, graceful and promising. Fame over there, solid and proud and vast, rising from the sea and aspiring towards the blue dome, filling its expanse, the sun gilding the smaller, slender steeples, here and there; of opulence and success; fair women

smiling from their bowered windows, mysterious, alluring.

Sandor prolonged the vision, it was so fair, so dear now that it had been found again, rebuilt more temptingly beautiful than ever his artist's imagination had been able to rear it. He would enjoy it to the full before he put his fortune again to the test. It might vanish again at that green table, to lie in ruins forever. There was his mysterious patron, to be sure, but—who knows? The whims of exalted personages rarely last long.

He took his courage into his hands, and returned to the rooms, selecting the table at which he had lost before in obedience to an impulse he did not stop to analyze. The *croupier* was still in his place, expressionless, observant, deft, repeating his monotonous, "*Faites votre jeu, messieurs! Faites votre jeu! Rien ne va plus!*" Sandor glanced at him curiously, and again the resemblance to the Stranger struck him, and—was it possible?—did the man really again give him that barely perceptible smile?

The woman with the picture hat, the gorgeous jewels, the eager eyes and flushing cheeks was still in his seat, a pile of gold before her. Led by the same impulse that had sent him back to the table where he had lost, he placed himself behind her. Ere ten minutes had passed, she gathered up her winnings, poured them into the jeweled purse, and got up.

"Pardon, Monsieur."

"Merci, Madame."

She looked at him, and recognized him.

"Your seat has brought me luck," she smiled. Then, low, "If you are in luck, come to dine with me. Hotel Cosmopolitain."

But Sandor was already intent upon the game. Red? No!

Black it must be this time. Why? Impulse again. But this time he stopped long enough to realize that, somehow or other, it was his strange friend's appearance that suggested the change, or—or—he grew bewildered—was it that *croupier*, who persisted in resembling the other one, and lost the resemblance the moment one began to look for it.

Sandor began cautiously on black. He won and doubled his stake. He kept on winning. Then another impulse told him that it was time to play the red. Again he won. And now he began to feel as if some mind outside his own was guiding him. He no longer planned his play, he staked impulsively, following that elusive suggestion. Some one was "thinking of him," for him, perhaps. Flushed, intent, he noticed subconsciously that the *croupier* was watching him closely.

At the end of two hours the spell fell from him. He came to himself, collected, calm, sane. Gathering up his enormous winnings,—there was a crowd now around the table watching him, a diplomat, a *demi-mondaine,* a duchess, and a railroad magnate crowding each other for his seat with polite eagerness behind his back,—he rose, stuffing the money into his pockets as he made his way through the crush, followed by envious eyes and audible whispers.

In the vestibule he stopped. The Stranger? He had forgotten to ask him for his name, his address. He must find him, however, to return

the money that had been his salvation. People were streaming out, down the steps, for it was the dinner hour.

At last, suddenly, he perceived his benefactor standing quite near him, listening with an indescribable expression upon his face, right elbow in left hand, pointed chin in the right, to a South American ex-president, who, after wholesale murders of unprecedented atrocity, had escaped by the skin of his teeth to Europe and the enormous stealings which he had prudently piled up in the Bank of England.

The Stranger smiled and nodded. Sandor went over to him with boyish eagerness.

"Oh, sir," he exclaimed!—the man had suddenly assumed his grand air again—"Oh, sir, how can I ever thank you? I have had such luck! I won it all back, and more than I have ever had before!"

He was eagerly fumbling in his stuffed pockets, as he spoke, and drew out a handful of notes, from which he counted with trembling fingers the money lent him. Handing it over, he continued:

"Thank you, again! And now, will you not come to dine with me?"

"Do not mention it, Monsieur Tatray. I am glad to have been able to render you this trifling service. Only its results make it seem great in your eye. But I am sorry I cannot accept your invitation. I am off for Korea to-night. I am beginning to have large interests there. The Japanese are civilizing the country, you know, according to the most approved Christian methods."

Did the Stranger sneer? Sandor did not stop to observe. He continued rapidly—his taut nerves were beginning to relax:

"But shall I not see you again? Won't you tell me your—"

"Certainly, my young friend, you shall see me again. Be sure that I will not lose sight of you. Indeed, I have the highest hopes of you for the future. Now take one of my cigarettes to quiet your nerves, and then back to your studies and to Budapest! We shall meet again."

Sandor lighted the cigarette. When he

looked up, as earlier in the afternoon on the terrace, the Stranger had disappeared. The ex-president, still standing nearby, was looking around him with a puzzled air.

* * * * * *

Sandor Tatray went back to Paris that very night, with a little fortune of over 100,000 francs securely tucked away in his breast pocket. As he lay in his berth, too excited to sleep, he reviewed again the happenings crowded into that one short day. From despair to comfort, to independence, to untrammeled pursuit of his ambitions!

The Stranger! He had done it all. Sandor wished that he knew his name, but the man had been pointedly reticent on that point. In fact, he had adroitly stopped Sandor's inquiry before it had been spoken. Undoubtedly he was an exalted personage, strictly preserving his incognito while amusing himself in his own way, a way apparently of large means, and talking strange things. Sandor wished, now that it was too late, that he had offered to paint his portrait. It would have been some recogni-

tion of the service rendered, some token of gratitude. Perhaps later? He might attempt the picture from memory, the man's personality had impressed him so much.

But when he awoke in the morning, after an unrefreshing short sleep, the Stranger's face had grown dim beyond recall in his memory. Try as he would, he could not keep his mental vision of it from merging into the sardonic features of the *croupier*. Their strange talk on the terrace, too, had gone beyond recall. And so, at the end of a week, there remained nothing but an impression of a chance encounter, a run of luck, a turn in the tide of Fortune.

That he would see the Stranger again he felt sure. Would he recognize him when he came?

The Devil

CHAPTER I

SANDOR TATRAY

THE bell tinkled twice in rapid succession in the hall of Sandor Tatray's studio; then, as André, his old servant, tarried, there was a nervous fumbling at the knob. The door opened, and the painter entered, meeting the hurrying servitor on the threshold.

"How is this, André?" he said, irritably. "I ring, you don't answer the door, and when I try it, I find that it is not locked. Anyone could have walked in."

"I don't understand it, sir. I'm sure I locked it when you left. I am sorry."

"Has anyone been here?"

"Only the landlord's agent. He wishes to know if you will renew the lease?"

"The lease? Is it possible that I have been here three years?"

"Yes, sir. Three years since you came back from Paris, and set up your easel here, engaged me, and painted my portrait first of all. Ah, sir, I often look at it as I set things to rights in the studio. That portrait brought you luck, sir, if I may be allowed to say so."

"Yes, that and Fanny's."

"But you painted me only once," said Andrê, with a touch of jealousy, "and you have painted her a hundred times. All Budapest knows Sandor Tatray's model."

"You mean that you made me famous with a single picture, and that it took a great many of Fanny's for me to make her name known. Well, have it your own way, Andrê, only don't grow conceited."

"And my portrait was reproduced in illustrated papers all over the world," exulted the old servant, with fond admiration.

"So was Fanny's, André, so was Fanny's."

Sandor had divested himself of his fur overcoat and hat, taken off his frock coat, whose buttonhole was adorned with a ribbon of an order, and put on a velvet painting jacket. He

now glanced around the large den with his ever-recurring delight in its contents and their arrangement.

It was a delightful room, a pleasure to the eye, the decorations in a sober, rich color effect, its wealth of art treasures deftly disposed, inviting inspection, but not insisting upon it. There were antique embroideries and superb Oriental porcelains, a bit of shining old Spanish brass here and there where a higher note of color was required, heavy hangings of brocade and velvet, medieval and Japanese armor, some excellent paintings, not all the artist's own, and all the odds and ends picked up with discrimination and arranged with the casual effect that hides so much of study. Yes, it was a delightful room, restful and inviting to the chance lay visitor, of infinite interest and pleasure to the connoisseur. The furniture was comfortable as well as valuable: inviting easy-chairs and low tables, a lounge, a huge bear-skin before the hearth, priceless rugs upon the floor, and, to one side, an old Gothic chair, the gem of Tatray's collection, tall, with a pulpit-

like, four-pointed back—an ecclesiastical throne, perhaps, taken from some monastery, or perhaps the chair of state of some belted knight of old.

The studio was as pleasantly situated as it was arranged. A glass door gave into the huge north room, with its enormous skylight, and through this door could be seen the Donau and the graceful bridge spanning it that links Buda to Pest.

Sandor threw himself down on the lounge, and helped himself to a cigarette. The servant pottered around the room, setting things a trifle to rights here and there, waiting for orders.

"Has my dress coat come back from the tailor's?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"White gloves and ties in order? Shirt all ready—studs and all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then, run to the florist's, and tell them not to forget the gardenia for my buttonhole."

"Are you not going to wear your Leopold's order to the Vörösss reception? Oh, sir, you should be so proud of it, you are the youngest man on whom it has ever been bestowed."

"I am proud of it, Andrê, but the gardenia is Madame Vörösss's favorite flower, and we must please our hostess first of all."

"She is a beautiful woman, sir, if an old servant may make free to say so. I have often seen her in her carriage. You ought to paint her picture."

"I am going to paint her picture, Andrê. That's why I told you to get everything in readiness, and see that this room was in order."

"You are going to paint her! Oh, I am so glad! That portrait will be famous."

"Now run away, André, and see to that flower."

"Yes, sir."

Left alone, Sandor Tatray looked around him with infinite content. Yes, he had every reason to be satisfied. Life had been good to him thus far. He had succeeded—not perhaps in the full measure of his ambition, but he was cer-

tainly on the way to gain all for which he had planned.

It was three years now since he had come back to Budapest from his studies abroad, preceded by a reputation in art circles that many an older man might have envied him. Since then his career had been a succession of successes; of portraits that had been features of the exhibitions at which they had been shown. The "Painter of Fair Women," they called him now. The great beauties of his own country had come first, then the great ladies of Austria. And now he was beginning to attract them from abroad, from Russia, from Italy—a Spanish duchess, then several royalties, and, quite recently, the young wife of an American railroad king, whose fragile, intellectual beauty had been a triumph of femininity, not of the dignity of rank. Sandor had exulted: Sargent drew them to London, he would draw them to Budapest. He had engagements for two years ahead.

Money flowed into his coffers, of course. He lived well, but with a certain sober wisdom.

He committed a folly here and there, to be sure, but remained always master of himself. His heart, so it was said, none could touch, neither the beauties of society and the stage whom he painted, nor the women whom he met in the houses of his friends, or elsewhere in the prosperous Bohemia of which he was an ornament. He had his *bonnes fortunes*, to be sure, but they were calm affairs, in which he took far more of sentiment than he gave, and ever Fanny, the "famous" Fanny remained his favorite model, the unofficial guardian of the comforts and the treasures of his home.

She was not intellectual, this Fanny, but she was very beautiful of face and form, and she had temperament. A gay, thoughtless creature, living but for the fleeting moment, she cheered his dark hours, for he was moody, like all men of genius—and genius he undoubtedly had. That her presence was grateful to him only because it served to make him forget the absence of another, she suspected with a woman's intuition, but never dared to question him. If she was not intellectual or well-edu-

cated, Fanny was wise with the wisdom of much experience of an impressionable heart.

Three short rings of the bell. Sandor knew them. The model had come to make her daily call, to see about posing and to give her capable attention to the details of a bachelor's household. There was a standing feud between her and André, who chafed under the authority which Sandor had given her, still more under that which she had gradually arrogated to herself.

The painter opened the door.

"Good afternoon, Sandor. Oh, what a face! You are not the least bit glad to see me."

"Good afternoon, Fanny."

"Won't you kiss me?"

"Certainly. It is a pleasure. There!—Now sit down, and be a good girl."

"Do you want me to pose?"

"Not to-day."

"To-morrow?"

"Not to-morrow."

"Not to-day, not to-morrow, never again! Oh, I know. I have seen it coming."

"I make no plans beyond the morrow."

"I know you, I know men. Something is in the air."

"Do be reasonable, Fanny."

"I am reasonable, I have always been reasonable. Lord, haven't I, though! Women have to be, because men won't. They can't," she added with conviction.

A reminiscent look came into her eyes. She was glancing down the long vista of her miscellaneous experience of the unreasonableness of man. After a while she began to talk rapidly, with growing excitement.

"What's the matter? You have painted me hundreds of times. Why shouldn't you paint me again? That's what I am here for. That's what you pay me for. I am perfectly calm, you see, I am per—fect—ly calm, am I not? Tell me, am I not?"

"Be reasonable, Fanny."

"I am, I am. 'Be reasonable!' Answer me, am I not perfectly calm?"

"Yes, you are, as phlegmatic as an old lady playing solitaire."

"It isn't true, I never play solitaire. I hate cards."

"All right, all right. Have a cigarette. It will quiet your calmness."

He took from his pocket an elaborately chased cigarette case, and opened it.

"Who gave you that case?" asked the model, much interested, forgetting all about her grievance in anticipation of a new one. "Let me see it; it is very handsome."

She took it in her hands, and examined it carefully.

"The monogram is beautiful," she commented. "Why didn't you have a coronet put over it?"

"Because I am not a nobleman, Fanny."

"All great artists are princes."

"Who told you that?"

"Henry."

"And who is Henry?"

"He was a poet."

"He was a poet? Is he dead?"

"No, indeed. He weighs two hundred pounds, and has a wife and six children."

"Then he is no longer a poet?"

"No. He is inspector of Belgian blocks in the Department of Highways and Streets."

"Sensible Henry. But then he is a nobleman no longer?"

"Why don't you want me to pose any more?"

"Really, Fanny, your sudden changes of conversation are very disconcerting."

"That is what men call tact," commented Fanny to the glowing tip of her cigarette. "They always treat us as if we were children. The child bumps its head, and begins to cry. 'Oh, look, at the nice black horsey with the long tail,' says the nurse, and the child forgets all about the bump. A woman is hurt and angry, and tries to speak her mind. The man gets scared. 'You have a smudge on your nose,' he says, or 'Your veil is not tied right.' Clever men! As if we didn't see through them."

"But you have led the conversation from the first."

"I am leading back to it now. What were we talking about?"

"About Henry and sonnets as the staff of life for a wife and six children."

Fanny looked puzzled, then distrustful. Then her eyes fell on the cigarette case in her lap. Her face cleared instantly.

"Who gave you that cigarette case?"

"Would you like to know?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You think I am jealous. Nothing of the kind. I got over being jealous years ago. It is a waste of time. Life is too short. I want to know because I think it shows exquisite taste."

"You think so? I am glad to hear it. That case was given to me by someone of whom I think a very great deal."

"More than of me?"

"I am afraid I do."

Fanny picked the cigarette case out of her lap with the tips of her fingers, as if it were a toad, and deposited it on the table.

"Who is it?" she asked, sternly.

"I thought this morning that I would make

myself a little present, and so I bought it."

Fanny sniffed.

"Why do you send me away day after day?" she asked again.

"I shall not need you for a long time, Fanny, because I am going to paint somebody's portrait."

"Oh, I know that, Madame Vörösss's."

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind, I know. But that is not the reason. You are going to be married." She looked at him triumphantly, then added: "But that's not the reason either."

"Oh, it isn't?"

"No, the reason is that you are in love with Madame Vörösss—with Jolan, the beautiful Jolan—"

"That will do, Fanny."

"And she is in love with you. I know it, I know it."

She continued to talk rapidly, heedless of Sandor's attempts to stop her, her voice rising to a scream.

"I know it! Why has she never come here

to see you with her husband? They are the oldest friends you have in Budapest, and he comes in often enough. Do you think I have no eyes, that I cannot put two and two together? You two love each other, and you are afraid. You haven't courage enough—"

"Fanny, be silent. I forbid you to talk of this. Never mention that lady's name again, here or anywhere else. There are things that are beyond your range of vision, beyond your mental and moral understanding."

"Fiddlesticks! I know that she is virtuous, and that you are good, just for this once; but it would be far more honest for people who love each other to—to—"

"Fanny, this is too much. You had better go home at once."

"Oh, I am going! And I am never coming back. I will never speak to you again, and you needn't think it! The lease of this studio is going to be renewed, now that she is coming here, but Fanny's lease will not be renewed, and for the same reason. Fanny must not pollute the air here for her!"

"Are you going?"

"Yes, I am going. Oh, the strange virtue of those high and mighty people! She loves you, and because she loves you, she arranges a marriage for you with a girl you do not love. Poor Mademoiselle Vilma—what's her name? I do not envy her. Yes; I do, I do. Oh, Sandor, forgive me."

She dropped into the Gothic chair, rose from it suddenly, and said very quietly:

"Forgive me, Sandor. I was wicked and jealous. I will be a good girl. I will go away, and you will let me come again."

"You had better never come here again, Fanny. I shall come to see you. We have things to settle between us."

"Money?"

"I want to make some provision for you. We have been good friends so long."

"You can give me money when I earn it, not otherwise. If I cannot pose for you, there is nothing to pay me for. And I will accept no more presents from you. Good-bye."

The door closed with a slam. Sandor sat

down again, half regretful that the resolution he had taken had ended in this violent rupture. Fanny had been a loyal friend, after all. Then, with the selfishness of love, he forgot her, to think of the thing nearest to his heart.

Yes, the one, the only woman, was coming at last to have her portrait painted by him. Sandor exulted. He had seen her constantly during the three years since his return, for she was the wife of his benefactor, Laszlo Vöröss, the man who had lent him the money to go abroad for his studies.

Deep down in his heart Sandor Tatray kept inviolate, in the midst of his materialistic life, two ideals which he worshipped with unending fidelity and enthusiasm, with unquestioning emotion—Jolan Vöröss and his Art. Her he put first, even though in hours of inspiration he might forget her for a moment for the sake of the canvas to which he transferred the soul as well as the features of his sitter—a shallow, frivolous soul, perhaps, just suggested with a touch of cynicism that made connoisseurs chuckle when they discussed the truth of the

likeness among themselves; or again, a noble mind expressed with noble reverence. But ever Sandor would return to the altar of his divinity. Her he had sketched a thousand times from the fulness of his ideal of her, which he knew was but the truth. Yes, Andrê was right. That portrait would be his masterpiece, since in the loving preparation for it, it was already his life-work.

His worship of her was compact of reverence, of high thoughts and noble purposes. Not a flaw of earthiness, of unworthy desire marred its beauty. It was the worship of the devout believer for his divinity:

The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the day for the morrow:
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow.

What were her feelings towards him? He knew not; he scrupulously refrained from approaching the question even in the most exalted hours of his exaltation. She was his good

angel, his lodestar, his inspiration, the fount of all that was noble in him, of the essential purity that had survived in him much thoughtless living, the surrender to many temptations. She was another's, and, if that other's rights counted for nought in his philosophy, her's counted for everything. She must be inviolate, unapproachable, pure as marble on the pedestal in his heart, never to be approached but with thoughts worthy of her perfection.

People said she had married for money, but he understood. Life is difficult at its beginnings for a woman who is beautiful, delicately nurtured, sensitive—and penniless.

Her husband, Laszlo Vöröss, was fifty when she married him; now he was fifty-six, and the richest man in the dual monarchy. The son of a successful army contractor, he had developed his father's business to international proportions. The Balkan peninsula, wisely farmed, had proved a veritable gold mine. He sold arms and provisions to Turk, Greek, Macedonian, Bulgarian and Servian with commercial im-

partiality. He smuggled rifles and cannon to South American revolutionaries in his own cargo steamers, and when there was peace there, he transported emigrants in them. He had sold horses to the British in South Africa—such horses!—machetes to the Cubans and Mausers to the Spaniards, shot-guns, it was said, to the Herreros: he was the acknowledged prince of a romantic trade. Occasionally his government warned him; but rarely, for he was shrewd. The wealth that rolled into his coffers was invested in land, in factories, and several millions of it had gone, during the last two years, into the building and the adornment of the grandest palace in Budapest. Sandor's portrait of Jolan was to occupy in it the place of honor.

Of the nature of her husband's business activities Jolan Vöröss knew nothing; of this Sandor was sure. She gave freely of his great wealth to charities, and she gave of her sympathy and brain as freely as of his gold. She had established an institution for the education and shelter of penniless girls of the better

classes—such girls of whom she had been one when she married—with a foundation for dowering them when they should wed. She had borne her husband no children, but he generously refrained from ever alluding to the disappointment she knew he felt. Sandor, though he fought the feeling loyally, as unworthy of the quality of his worship, was consoled by her childlessness. He frankly rejoiced that he had been able to repay Vörösss's loan to him so soon, thanks to that lucky day at Monte Carlo, even though he loyally acknowledged the generosity of the rich man's intentions.

That day at Monte Carlo! Sandor had not thought of it in years. Its events had become blurred over night, he could not remember the face of the Stranger who had saved him,—his second benefactor,—nothing of their strange talk (he dimly knew that it had been a very strange conversation), nothing but the fact that he had been penniless, that confession to Vörösss of the use to which his money had been put was out of the question, and that this distinguished Stranger, with the air of a prince,

had helped him, and made possible the continuance of his career.

Sandor lighted a cigarette, a new brand which his tobacconist had sent him for trial. The first whiff was strangely familiar to him. Surely, he had smoked these cigarettes before? He looked at the package, then at the slender, burning roll between his fingers. No, he did not known this brand. But the cigarette was very good, indeed, a blend of Egyptian, he judged, with some unknown tobacco.

He smoked on with intense delight, and as the light gray smoke rose in little spirals from the tip, and softly penetrated his nostrils and filled the air about him with a soft, aromatic haze, his thoughts turned more definitely to the gambling rooms, the vision on the Terrace, of the castle of his hopes and ambitions, and to the laughing seductive faces at its many casements. Yes, it had come true, and he would build far fairer than he had dreamt.

Sandor lighted another cigarette. The room grew hazier and hazier, its far corners indistinct. He closed his eyes, and behold! the faces

at the windows of his dream castle had disappeared, all but one, which smiled upon him alluringly, beckoning him gently, softly, modestly to approach, holding out its arms suddenly with a passionate gesture of surrender.

Impulsively the painter moved forward—his unapproachable queen, his Jolan, was calling him, with the simple, silent cry of human love seeking its own. She had stepped down from her pedestal, his divinity no longer, but a warm, palpitating, living woman. . . .

Sandor Tatray awoke, his brain in a whirl, his heart beating fast. What! in a dream he had dared to lower his idol to the level of common, frail humanity?

He sat up and shivered, already doing penance in his heart for his sacrilege, and yet—she had been nearly his, their lips had almost touched. He put the vision from him, but it returned, and would not be denied. Unconsciously he faced it, and surrendered himself to the sensuous allurement of the dream.

But not for long.

"No!" he said aloud, "No! I will not. Oh,

Jolan, forgive me. I will reverence you more than ever now!"

The door opened, admitting André.

"The florist will have the gardenia here by nine o'clock to-night, sir. It is expected by the eight o'clock train from Italy."

"All right, André."

"Pardon me, sir, has somebody been here in my absence?"

"No; why?"

"The room is full of cigarette smoke, and —I don't know—but it *feels* as if somebody had been here."

Sandor was silent. Yes, he felt it, too. Ah, yes, she had been here in that dream of a moment. But no, that was not it. It was something else—it eluded him. He looked into the dim corners of the apartment, then shivered.

"Nonsense," he said, irritably. "Light the fire. You had better see to it that the door is closed hereafter, otherwise we shall be imagining that there are burglars in the house."

"I have looked in every nook and corner

already, sir, and there is nobody here but ourselves."

"All right then. Now open the window in the studio, and leave the door open. We want some fresh air in here."

"Very well, sir."

Sandor sat down by the fire André had kindled, which was now flaming merrily, casting a red glow out upon the Persian rug before it and up to the ceiling, playing on the way with the elaborate carvings of the Gothic chair, dyeing purple its leather back, gilding as with gold its elaborate oaken carvings.

As he sat staring there into the glow, Sandor's peace of mind returned to him. His divinity regained her pedestal in his heart, unapproachable, flawless as ever. And he bent down before it with all the purity of his long faith and worshipped with the old singleness of purpose—to keep her there, his good angel, his lodestar, far above all other women.

The bell rang suddenly—a decisive, commanding, domineering ring that would accept no denial.

"That's Vörösss," said Sandor to himself.

He got up from his low seat by the fire, arranged his cravat, hastily took a look at his face in the small Venetian mirror unobtrusively standing at one side of the mantelpiece, an ornament rather than a convenience, gave his moustache the little twirl that was an unconscious habit with him, and advanced into the centre of the room.

The bell rang again, with a certain exasperation now added to its command. André came running in.

"Hurry, André ; where have you been? Can't you be more prompt?"

A moment later the servant opened the door into the den, and said, with all the deference due to a man of untold millions:

"Monsieur and Madame Vörösss."

"Pardon me, Sandor, for ringing so hard," said Vörösss, as the painter kissed Jolan's hand, "but I am in a hurry, always in a hurry. Ah! business. What do you artists know about it?"

Laszlo Vörösss was a bulky man, not tall, but broad of back and deep of chest, with a heavy

voice which success had made peremptory, as it had given a touch of arrogance to his manner. Prosperity was writ large over his corpulent person, decision was spelled by his narrow-lipped, firm mouth, but the eyes, small and of an indecisive color, had a friendly twinkle that attracted. Eyebrows he had none, and his head was bald to the ear line. A solid citizen, but not a romantic personage. But as he turned to his wife, a change came over him, of deference and fondness and indulgence, of pride, also, in this the most treasured of all his possessions.

"Well, Jolan, here you are at last in the executor's hands," he said, with heavy jocularity. Then to Sandor:

"I have often twitted her about her disinclination to have her portrait painted. Of course, we could have none but you to do it. You are a tradition in the family, and then, a portrait by Sandor Tatray! My boy, you have been successful. I am proud of you. I congratulate you."

"Thank you, thank you," murmured Sandor.

Jolan had begun to walk about the room, inspecting its many treasures with evident delight and understanding. She knew that it was her husband's habit to consider himself the most important person present wherever he was, and to act, still more, to talk accordingly. Therefore she had said nothing beyond the first few words of greeting. Vöröss now continued.

"Yes, for three years I have been trying to persuade her to sit to you. I almost believe she has some superstition about it. It was only the house I have built for her that decided her at last. A casket worthy of my jewel, you know, and I want her face to be in it even when she leaves it for a little while, to greet me on my return. A little fancy of mine, you know."

He began to button up his overcoat again, and to draw on his glove.

"Well," he said, "I must be off. An affair of importance, you know, a large contract for army supplies. I expect a telegram any moment. If the deal comes off, it will mean a sable cloak for you, Jolan."

"A sable cloak for me," repeated Jolan. "What will you do when there is nothing left in the world for me to desire?"

"I will trust you for that. A woman always has unfulfilled desires, eh, Sandor?"

"Don't ask me," said the painter lightly. "You know, I am not a married man."

Vörösss laughed significantly, and held out his hand.

"Good-bye."

"Don't go yet," said Jolan hastily. "Isn't this a delightful room—a veritable curiosity shop, an art museum, I should say."

"Yes, yes," said the husband, "very interesting place. Who is the lady of the portrait over there, Sandor? Oh, of course, that's the famous Fanny. Is she about? I should like to see her."

"No, she is not about," answered Sandor, shortly. This reference, in Jolan's presence, to the model embarrassed him.

"Well, my son, I wonder if you will paint her very often after you are married. I dare say Vilma will see to that. You understand that we give this great house-warming chiefly

for you and her. Jolan has set her heart on this match, and you could not please us better than by announcing your engagement to-night in our new home, on the day of its formal opening."

"I shall speak to her about it."

"Vilma is a charming girl," said Jolan, softly. "She will make you a good, loyal, loving wife."

"Well, I'm off," repeated Vöröss.

His wife again detained him.

"Wait a moment," she said. "Now about the portrait. Let us understand each other clearly."

"Half-length, seated, *décolletée,* in ball-gown," said Sandor. "The portrait is to be painted for the library, and is to hang over the mantel. Color scheme of library, green and gold. I have seen it, I have sat in it and looked at it and at the mantelpiece; I have made the proper preparations here in the studio. I think I can promise that you will be content with me."

"We know, we know," broke in the husband

again, with his unconscious patronage. "We expect nothing less from you. We want you to be known hereafter as the painter of the Vörösss picture. And now I'm really off. What time shall I come back for her, Sandor?"

"It will be dark in an hour, and you know, unlike you, I can work only by daylight."

"That does not give you much time for the first sitting."

"We can find the pose, and the proper light, and I can make the sketch so as to have it ready for—when shall we have the next sitting?"

"Oh, we can arrange that later on," Jolan broke in, somewhat nervously. "No, no, better settle it right now," she added, eagerly, as Vörösss took up his hat.

"My dear," he said fondly, "never before in the six years of our married life have you detained me from my business so long. It is highly flattering to me, but really, I must be off. Think of that sable cloak!"

"What will you do if you cannot return in time?"

"I will send the carriage back for you. Don't worry, I shan't forget you."

He began to move towards the door, but stopped again half way.

"Well, Sandor, I leave you my dearest possession. I trust you."

He resolutely turned around, and walked swiftly to the door. Sandor opened it, and closed it behind him. The painter was alone with the woman—at last.

CHAPTER II

ENTER—THE DEVIL

SANDOR closed the door behind Vörös, and stood for a moment in the dark hall, with his hand on the knob. His temples throbbed, his blood leaped, his brain raced with confused thoughts that vainly sought to bring some order, some reason, into his riotous emotions.

She was here, alone, with him! The realization of the fact crowded every other thought into the background. It was the fact itself that thus affected him: its possibilities, its meaning, did not come home to him. Jolan still stood on her pedestal in the temple of his heart, serene and unapproachable, but—she was present in the body, closer to him than she had been for even a single minute during the three years since his return—the years of calm, friendly intercourse under the protection of her husband's roof. She was now

sitting by his fireside, probably, awaiting him.

The painter closed his eyes. He must compose himself, must be master of himself before he went into her presence. He was young, he was impulsive—he realized that good resolutions may be overthrown by an unexpected rush of irresistible emotion. And so he waited, exerting all his will power to subdue this unforeseen tumult in his breast. The dream image of the afternoon, in the delicate blue-gray haze of the cigarette, rose before him. He warded it off, mechanically with his hand—banished it from his insurgent memory.

Calm returned to him. The pure, distant worship of three long years reasserted itself, and when he re-entered the room it was with the feeling of a devotee whose idol has been transported from some strange shrine to that erected by his own hands, to be adored there more worthily than ever.

Jolan was till standing in the centre of the room, her coat still tightly buttoned, her hands still gloved. Something in her attitude sug-

gested the departing casual visitor rather than the arriving sitter.

"Why, you look as if you were going to take your leave at once," said Sandor, on the impulse of the moment.

"I wish that I had gone with my husband. I should have made some excuse—a headache—anything at all."

"But why?"

"I cannot tell, but I feel that I want to go away, that it would be better if I did not have my picture painted. I have always felt about it that way; I have refused for three years, but Laszlo has insisted. Call it superstition, if you will, or premonition, but—there it is, and I feel it stronger now than ever before. On the way here, in the carriage, I wanted to protest, to appeal to my husband, but I dared not. What reason could I have given?"

She shivered a little, as Sandor had shivered earlier in the day.

"Sit down a moment by the fire, Jolan. The drive may have chilled you. It is very cold today."

"It is not that, for my hands are warm and my cheeks burn."

"Why should you feel that way about it? Having one's portrait painted is a very simple experience. One finds the pose, and—there you are. When you are tired, we stop for the day."

"I know, Sandor, I know—but I feel so strange here."

"Ah, yes, in all these three years that I have been a welcome friend in your house, I have never been able to induce you to visit me in mine. Laszlo always had some perfectly natural story to account for his coming alone—it never has seemed to strike him, but I knew, and felt it, and it made me sorry that you should thus evade me."

"Well, I have come at last, have I not? Here I am, and now I know that my feeling in the matter was right."

"But surely, Jolan—"

"I cannot help it, Sandor. I feel as if I were utterly alone in the world, without protection. I ought to have brought my maid."

"Did Laszlo suggest it?"

"I do not believe that he gave the question a moment's thought, and yet—why did he say just now that he trusted you?"

"Did he? Oh, yes, I believe he did. I doubt that he attached any particular meaning to it. You know, one often says things that sound quite differently from the speaker's intention."

"I do not know, Sandor. I have often thought that he knew—well, of our friendship six years ago."

"To tell the truth, Jolan, the same idea has occurred to me. Indeed, I have a suspicion that he lent me the money to go abroad just after your marriage because—because he may have thought that it would be better for me, easier for me, if I did not see you for some time."

"You mean if we did not see each other, do you not? We might as well be frank."

"Well, yes. I mean no disloyalty to Laszlo, who has been a true friend to me from first to last, ever ready to be of service, using all his great influence in my behalf, always anxious,

in the early days, that I should not be hampered by lack of money. But he is a clever man, a manager of large affairs—why should he not have undertaken to manage his young wife a little, and her young friend a very great deal?"

"And oh, he was wise, was he not, Sandor? Your success proves that."

"Yes, he was wise. It was fate, I suppose, that shaped our fortunes. And yet, I sometimes dream of another life, humble, obscure, harassed by poverty, that still might have been infinitely sweet."

"Don't, Sandor, don't."

Jolan had grown very pale. There were tears in her eyes, her lips trembled, and she plucked nervously at her gloves.

"It is a selfish dream," continued Sandor, slowly, "which would rob you of all that makes your existence beautiful and wide, that fills it with the fulness of gratified desires."

The fire burned dim and low. The room was filled with the mysterious silence of falling twilight. The two heads bent a little closer together in their chairs by the fender.

"Sandor," said Jolan, softly, "we can afford now to talk about the past. It is over and done with—a boy-and-girl fancy that would have died a natural death in any event."

"A boy-and-girl fancy," answered the painter, in the same low, level tones. "Yes, we were young, very young. You were barely nineteen, and I was twenty-two. It was a hard life for both of us, Jolan—for you, the poor governess in the rich man's house; for me, the poor struggling drawing-master who had cold water and dry bread for his breakfast, and often could not paint because, with all his self-denial, he could not buy paint and brushes and canvas. My widowed father had had ambitions for me, he had done his best to fit me for my career, but he died when I was eighteen, and you know that government clerks do not leave competences behind them when they die. Oh, it was a hard struggle, a bitter struggle, until I earned my first few guldens in the house of your husband's father, teaching the little son of his second marriage how to sharpen a pencil."

"It was a hard, a bitter struggle for me,

Sandor. Like you, alone in the world; like you, the daughter of a poor government employee, an assistant teacher in a girls' school at seventeen,—nursery governess in reality, harassed by unruly, spoiled children of rich people on the one hand, snubbed by the headmistress and the teachers on the other,—I felt as if heaven had opened to me when I entered the Vöröss home as companion to that dear little child that died so soon."

"And Laszlo was there."

"And Laszlo was there—the oldest son, a man grown, serious, full of affairs, his father's pride."

"He seemed so old to me then," said Sandor, reminiscently. "He was nearly fifty at that time."

"He seemed so old to me then," echoed Jolan, under her breath, surrendering more and more to the charm of their innocent reminiscences. She felt at ease now, comfortably ensconced before that softly glowing fire.

"And then," continued the painter, "and then we began to meet in the school-room. Your

little pupil was so interested in what my little pupil was doing, that you must bring her in to look on a moment at every lesson." He laughed softly, with fond raillery.

"I brought her in to look on," she repeated, dreamily, her gaze upon the dying glow of the fire.

"How long was it? I don't remember," continued Sandor, almost in a whisper. "Those lessons, twice a week, became the only happiness in my narrow, hopeless existence. I forgot that I could have no future without the means to lay its foundations. I forgot my shabby clothes, my cold room, my hunger, my misery. You would be there, at the end of the hour, to talk to me for a moment, to smile that wondrous smile which your eyes reflected from your lips, to give me courage to live through the days until that hour came around again."

"And I counted the hours that intervened."

"Then—do you remember, Jolan, do you remember—that day when the little girl was indisposed, and you came in alone to tell the boy that his new pony was in the stable? Do

you remember how he rushed from the room without thinking of asking permission, how he left us alone together?"

"He left us alone. It was the first time and the last."

"And then we kissed each other—one timid, gentle kiss. I have never forgotten it. That same evening you accepted Laszlo."

"Oh!" cried Jolan, "Oh, you did not understand! I feared you would not, I have feared it all these years."

"I did understand, Jolan—dear. Misery teaches us to understand early. You were alone in the world, with none to guide or advise you; you were inexperienced, you knew nothing of life, and Laszlo was very gentle and good to you, as he was friendly and encouraging to me."

"Gentle and good, and friendly and encouraging. Yes, Laszlo has been all these things. He is masterful only in his business dealings. He has to be, he says."

"He was masterful, and he took you, a little girl knowing nothing of life, as he would have

plucked a rosebud. How could an awakening sentiment, hardly realized, how could one single, timid kiss have barred his way?"

"Yes, it was a boy-and-girl affair."

"But it was sweet, unspeakably sweet."

"You have forgotten it, Sandor. Tell me that you have forgotten it?"

"Have you, Jolan? Oh, forgive me, I have no right to ask you."

"I am Laszlo Vöröss's wife." She said it very gently, robbing the rebuke of all its sting. "I have a husband who is ever kind and thoughtful, whose wisdom smoothes many a rough place on my path, who indulges me in all my desires, who would spoil me utterly if I would let him."

Jolan sat upright. The spell was passing. One look she gave him in which there was a world of feeling. Then she got up.

"Of course you have forgotten that boy-and-girl affair," she decided for him, with a frank smile, "for are you not going to be married? Have you not promised to announce your engagement at the formal opening of the new Vöröss home to-night? Think of the *éclat* in

the papers. 'The great portrait painter, Sandor Tatray, and Mademoiselle Vilma Tôth, the heiress, last night announced their coming marriage at the great ball given by Monsieur and Madame Vöröss in their new palace.' Laszlo will be content. He has his little vanities. And to-morrow morning you will have forgotten altogether."

"I will put away the memory, Jolan, but once in a long while I shall open the secret drawer in which it is kept, and take it out, and remember the sweetest moment of my youth."

"And now," said Jolan, rising briskly, "to work. I am glad now that I came, Sandor. We shall be better friends now than ever, loyal friends on the journey through life—you and I and Laszlo and Vilma.

"Monsieur Tatray," she went on with playful formality, "you have consented to paint my portrait, and have arranged for the first sitting to-day. What must I do?"

"Madame Vöröss, the first thing to do is to take off that blouse and arrange this scarf around your shoulders. It is the color of the

ball-dress in which you are to be painted, but you need not bring it until we have decided upon the pose, and I have made the sketch. I made a charcoal drawing yesterday: it is on my easel, but since I have seen you here, I know that it will not do. I have always wished to paint you, though I carefully refrained from telling you—you know why. I have sketched you a hundred times, and kept the sketches in a portfolio under lock and key. Yours is going to be my best picture. I feel it, I know it.

"And now I shall leave you alone while you exchange your blouse for the scarf. I lock the door into the hall—so. Now I lock this door, which leads to my dressing-room and the rest of the apartment—so. Then I go through this door into the studio, and you lock it behind me. Nobody is here, nobody can get in. You will be alone."

Sandor went towards the glass door that led into the studio, and looked through it and through the great north window beyond it.

"It is growing dark," he said, "there is a

snow storm coming up. I am afraid that the light won't be very good, and that it won't last long."

"Why not put it off till-to-morrow?" asked Jolan, entirely without afterthought. Sandor turned from the door, and looked at her.

"And your husband?" he said.

"How—my husband? What do you mean?"

"What are we to tell him? He will naturally ask what we have been doing during more than an hour. He is very observant. He will note that this storm is coming up, and say to himself, 'Well, Sandor had time to work a little before the light failed him, anyhow.' "

Jolan was silent. All the doubts, the vague fears, the premonitions that had kept her away from this place for so long, that had prompted her through three years to persist in her refusal to have her picture painted there, came trooping back to her. She knew that deep in his heart Laszlo was passionately jealous, with the jealousy of an elderly man for his young wife—the jealousy of proud possession rather than of love.

"Then what are we to do?" she asked, blankly.

"Get to work as soon as possible."

"Next time I will bring my maid."

"You cannot do that now."

"Why not?"

"Laszlo will want to know the reason. He will grow suspicious, don't you see? Of me, of course, not of you," he added, hastily.

"Oh, I wish I had never begun it. Something told me."

"Not at all, Jolan. You are only a bit nervous. You are locked in, now lock me out, and when you are ready, open this door and call me."

He went out, and Jolan turned the key behind him.

Left alone, she stood a moment undecided. She felt unutterably depressed, as if warned of some unknown danger ahead of her. She shivered again, and resumed her seat before the fire, facing the Gothic chair, which the low fire no longer crimsoned and gilded with its leaping flames, leaving it in the semi-obscurity

of the shadow cast by the fading daylight on its tall, four-peaked back.

She sighed a little, got up, took the scarf from the table on which Sandor had placed it, resumed her seat, and unbuttoned the collar of her blouse.

Then she stopped, and looked around the room. She was alone, she knew, locked in, safe from all intrusion—there was no one, there could be no one there, and yet, she felt as if she were being watched, from afar. She was conscious of the partial disrobing she was about to begin—conscious as she had been on the night of her wedding.

The comparison struck her. So that was it? And this was the total result of six years of constant self-discipline, of loyalty in deed and word and thought. Their long, tender talk just now, innocent of all harm—had it set in motion the springs of forbidden thought—summoned from the tomb the dread ghost of a lost love decently interred? Had she not killed that love and forbidden its very memory an entrance to the chamber of her heart? No;

here it was—clamoring for admission, demanding its rights—simply because she was about to bare her shoulders for a simple purpose in the house of the man she loved—alone with him.

Alone with him! The consciousness of that fact would not leave her. It obsessed her: it obtruded itself as if suggested by some mental power from without.

Jolan was no prude. She had bared her arms and shoulders before in public, at dinners, at dances, at receptions, at the opera. But—it was the first time the coincidence struck her—Sandor had never seen her on these ceremonial occasions; had he kept away from them on purpose, and for that very reason? Had he been afraid?

But then—

A thought sprang suddenly into being in her agitated mind, a thought that changed into a wish, a wish that for a moment took on the strength of intensest impulse. . . . She turned towards the door of the studio.

Jolan recovered her poise with an effort.

She grew pale, then began to blush, the red spreading from her cheeks to the stately column of her white neck. She felt it burning the flesh under the thin silk of her blouse, as it burned her ears and smarted her eyes. She hastily began to button the collar again, gazing before her with unseeing eyes. She recognized the potency of a force which hitherto she had held to be subject to a resolution that is honestly exerted. She who, from her sheltered pedestal, had somewhat scornfully pitied and judged, suddenly understood.

Ah, but she was not like these others. She was strong, not weak! she would prove it, and vindicate her right to sit in judgment.

"No," she said aloud, as if to convince herself, "this is unworthy of me, unworthy of the high standard I set for myself when I promised to give loyalty where I could not give love. It is unworthy of that love where it has been bestowed by a force outside myself, unworthy of Sandor, so true to Laszlo and to me—to honor. Oh, if he could have read my thoughts, if he could have surprised that one moment of temp-

tation, how I would fall from the eminence on which he has set me."

She resolutely began unfastening the waist from first button to last, drawing it apart to the shoulders. Then she stopped again, conscious once more of that vague, disconcerting feeling that she was being watched. She took another look around the room, shook off the impression, got up from the chair, and took off the waist, baring her fine shoulders, her firm, lovely arms tapering from shoulder to wrist.

She turned to the Venetian mirror over the fire and looked at herself. Yes, she was beautiful. The serenity that was the great charm of her face had returned to it; her large brown eyes gazed steadily and frankly back at her, their depths untroubled. The full mouth smiled a little over the rounded chin. The masses of her chestnut hair crowned the smooth brow and framed the small ears. The fire leaped up at this moment, illuminated her features with a high light, flickered over them with a strange effect of semi-shadows, then settled down again

to its soft red glow under white-gray ashes.

This glimpse of her beauty, of its dignified calm, the outward expression of a long and intense inner struggle won, reassured Jolan. She felt again the model wife of her elderly husband—a dignified, stately woman, without reproach, who pays in virtue and the fulfilment of duty the price that she cannot pay in love.

Now the scarf. She took it from the chair where she had placed it, and looked again in the mirror. No; the glass was too small to aid her in any satisfactory arrangement of its filmy mass. She must just throw it around her, and look in the larger looking-glass that she would undoubtedly find in the studio itself. She turned around, the drapery in one hand, the waist in the other, looking for some place to hang it upon.

The peaked back of the Gothic chair: it would be safe there until it would be needed again.

Jolan went towards it, then gave a muffled cry of astonishment and fright. Her heart stood still for a moment, then began to beat fast, sending the blood racing to her temples.

She spasmodically grasped veil and blouse and instinctively held them up to her chin.

Out of the depths of the chair, empty but a moment before, there rose, with a smile of politely dissimulated mockery, a Stranger, who advanced towards her and bowed with courtly grace.

Jolan's unnerved fingers dropped the blouse. The Stranger stooped, picked it up, and said in a deep, well-modulated voice, the voice of a man of culture and breeding:

"Allow me, Madame."

Jolan continued to stare at him in speechless amazement. Where had he come from?

The Stranger was a man between thirty-five and forty, swarthy of complexion, swarthier even than most Hungarians, with the stamp upon him of tropical heats. His coal-black eyes were set deep under curiously arched eyebrows, his lustreless black hair was parted in the middle and brushed abruptly backward, leaving an arrow-point in the middle of the high forehead, which indicated the beginning of a line that was continued in the long, bowed nose and

the lean, prominent chin. His complexion had a tinge of olive in it. It was a striking face, and it had great distinction. The man was immaculately dressed in a frock coat and trousers of dark material, with a quiet, sober elegance that suggested good taste, an accomplished valet, and a London tailor. The only bit of color in his appearance was a red scarf, a triumph of the sense of felicitous contrast.

Jolan continued to stare at the man, frightened, indignant, yet attracted and at the same time repelled by that strange face, with its unmistakable aristocratic stamp and its elusive mockery.

"Permit me to explain, Madame," he resumed, in a deep, cultivated voice that had a soothing quality. "Permit me to explain. I am an old friend of Sandor's. I had not seen him for several years. I arrived here suddenly this afternoon. No one answered my ring at the bell—I tried the door, it was open. I entered, sat down in this chair, and fell asleep. I awoke, I saw you in the act of disrobing. Imagine the position in which I was placed. What

should I do? Keep quiet, since you evidently had not seen me when I entered. But then—you might have discovered me later, and your confusion would have been all the greater. I could never have persuaded you that I had been asleep all the time. And so—I awoke just as you had taken off your waist—I thought it best to make my presence known before—"

Jolan saw the insinuation, and found her voice.

"Monsieur," she said, "be silent. Monsieur Tatray will speak with you."

Turning to the studio door, she struck the glass sharply with her fist. "Sandor!" she called, "Sandor! Come here immediately."

The Stranger smiled to himself, and murmured, under his breath:

"A good beginning. At the very first words I speak, she admits that she is in a false position. Now they will begin to explain. Satan, you grow cleverer every year."

CHAPTER III

THE DEVIL'S STRATEGY

SANDOR entered the den through the door which Jolan had unlocked with fumbling haste.

"There is a stranger here," she began excitedly, slipping into her coat, and buttoning it to the chin—"an old friend of yours, he says. He—he saw me, and—and—"

The painter turned toward the Stranger and looked at him in speechless astonishment.

"Well, Sandor, don't you recognize me?"

"Will you explain?" The artist's question had a menacing ring in it.

"You really do not remember me? At Monte Carlo, one day, six years ago, and more? Oh, Sandor, you hurt my feelings! Here I arrive with a heart overflowing with affection and good intentions, rejoicing to press the hand of the dear fellow in whose brilliant career I. too, can claim a little share, and—"

"The Stranger of Monte Carlo! Indeed, indeed, I remember you. I was ruined, my future was spoiled beyond repair, I had lost every penny—money that had been lent me for another purpose—and you saved me. Ah, you are indeed welcome, sir, and may Heaven bless you."

The Stranger shrank back for an imperceptible moment, a pallor creeping under his olive skin. Then he straightened his graceful figure, and said, jauntily:

"We'll waive the blessing. Heaven has its prejudices. But I accept the welcome. Ah! I was not mistaken."

"No, I have not forgotten that day," continued Sandor, with growing animation, "but the memory of it is confused. You gave me a handful of gold that glittered strangely—"

"Gold always glitters more when others have it in abundance, and we ourselves are penniless. But I lent you the money in bank notes—"

"I had forgotten—I thought . . . Are you sure? And you said strange things—"

"It was you who said strange things, Sandor,

of a girl whom you loved, who had pledged her troth to you, and on the same day accepted another man."

Sandor and Jolan stared at each other in frightened amazement.

"You raved that you could never forget her, that you knew she loved you, that you must keep away from her for both your sakes. . . . Oh, you did not blame her. She was young, you said, and alone, and poor, and that other man rich and masterful."

"I do not remember anything of the kind," said Sandor, shortly.

"Nor of the castles in Spain about which you told me?"

"Yes; that I remember very well, but I never told you about the woman."

"But how should I know otherwise? You were excited that day, Sandor; remember, your nerves were all unstrung. I had to give you a cigarette to calm them. And even then you left me twice; suddenly, unaccountably. First on the Terrace, and then in the vestibule, with-

out a word. I looked up. You were gone. But no wonder. I forgive you.

"But," he continued, changing his abrupt utterance, which chopped his words into brief sentences, to the soft speech of the well-bred man, "won't you introduce me?"

"I—I don't know your name," stammered Sandor. . . . "Have I forgotten that, too?"

"No, no. Truth to tell, I desired to preserve my incognito. I always travel incognito, I have to; I am too well known to do otherwise. Call me Dr. Nicholas, but before you introduce me, let me assure you that my social standing is unimpeachable: I have the *entrée* to the closest circles in the world, I am a member of all the respectable clubs of Europe, including the Jockey of Budapest, and I belong to one of the oldest families. By birth I am entitled to be received at Court in Vienna, in Madrid, in London, in Berlin, in St. Petersburg. I owe you this egotistical explanation, so that you may feel safe in introducing me."

"Dr. Nicholas," said Sandor, considerably impressed by his benefactor's credentials, "Madame Laszlo Vörösss."

Dr. Nicholas bowed with the elaborate deference of continental Europe.

"I must again offer you my apologies, Madame Vörösss," he said, smoothly, "and beg that you will accept them. I am most horribly embarrassed. To surprise the secret of a woman of the world . . . "

"But there is no secret. I came here to have my picture painted."

"Ah, yes! ah, yes! of course. I forgot that Sandor is a portrait painter. I only remembered that he is a gay young bachelor."

"This is infamous!"

"I acknowledge it. But then, I plead in extenuation the strange look of the whole affair. I have seen so much of the world, you know, one gets cynical, I fear. *Honi soit qui mal y pense,* as the dear Prince used to say, with equal right no doubt, before the cares of state began to weigh heavily upon him. You may count on my discretion."

Fear began to struggle with indignation in Jolan's heart.

"There is no need of your discretion," she said, agitatedly; "it is all open and above board. There is no secret to be kept from anyone. The truth can be told to anyone who wants to hear it."

"No doubt, no doubt. But what avails truth against false appearances? You know how it is. Discretion is more necessary in a case of false appearances than where the plain truth is concerned. You will agree with me on that?"

Jolan made a hopeless gesture. Sandor looked puzzled.

"Then you will also agree that my promise of discretion cannot offend you. I promise to be silent about false appearances, which have been explained to me at considerable length. I can swear to that, if it ever becomes necessary."

"Don't you understand, Sandor?" Jolan broke out. "Don't you see what is in his mind? His apology is more insulting than his suspicion."

"Do you mean to say that you suspected this —this lady of—"

Sandor choked with rage. The insult now was clear to him. It was too much. This man assumed . . . He could not put the abominable thought in words. With all his voluble protestation, it was clear that he clung to his evil thought.

"You shall answer to me for this," muttered the painter, darkly.

"But that would only make the wrong appearances worse. Don't you see that we are all in the same boat? That all we can do is to agree to keep silence? Both of you must rely upon my discretion, as, I assure you, you can. Suppose you fight me? What follows? My name and titles cannot be hidden. The duel will be reported the world over. People begin to look for the cause of the quarrel. You have a servant. No doubt he is discreet, but all servants talk among themselves about their masters. That's their way of belonging to the aristocracy. Madame was brought here by her husband in a brougham, with coachman and footman.

Monsieur was taken away by them, alone. The servants meet . . . they put two and two together . . . the footman tells it to his sweetheart, who is maid in another house; the maid tells the story to her lady while brushing her hair—and there you are. There are people who dare not look at a horse, least of all when they have been caught leading others away many a time, which is your case, Sandor. Madame, we know, has never even thought of looking at the horse. So there you are. False appearances had better be ignored."

Jolan, who had been listening nervously, suddenly asked:

"How do you know that I arrived with my husband in our carriage? Then you were not asleep?"

"I assure you, I was. I only considered it likely that Madame Vöröss would not come on foot. Now, if you had come heavily veiled, how much worse the case would be."

"You persist in suggesting that there is something wrong. Sandor, make him stop."

"Pardon me, but is not your husband the

proper person to appeal to? If this is anybody's business,—which it cannot be according to your own explanation,—it is his."

"Sir," said Sandor, with great dignity, "you will stop talking about this matter. I forbid you to doubt this lady's word."

"But that is exactly what I proposed twenty minutes ago. So we will say no more about it. I accept Madame's explanation, she accepts my apology. Now let us talk of something else."

Jolan had been looking around the room, her gaze fixing itself ultimately upon the Gothic chair. An uncanny thought struck her.

"Sandor," she whispered, awestruck, "that man was not in that chair when Laszlo and I arrived. I know, because I looked at it and admired it."

"Yes, Dr. Nicholas, there is something about this that has a very queer look. It is your turn to explain now, and perhaps we will believe you. Wrong appearances, you know," he added, sarcastically.

The Stranger took his right elbow in his

left hand, and caressed his long chin with the right—Sandor suddenly remembered the attitude—and turned towards the chair. He gazed at it long and earnestly.

"Madame is sure that I was not seated in that chair when she arrived?"

"I am," said Jolan, positively.

"Then, of course, it is impossible that I should be here now. I did not arrive since she came in, for Sandor locked the doors. . . . If I am not here now, I can have seen nothing. So now it is all explained satisfactorily. I am really glad that I am out of the affair entirely."

He continued, in a conversational tone:

"You have had Bonci here for six weeks, I understand. I am sorry that I missed him. He is a glorious artist. His 'Ottavio' is a flawless work of vocal art."

Jolan and Sandor did not answer, but the Stranger continued, undismayed:

"I was in New York last fall, and saw St. Gaudens' *Sherman.* It is a magnificent work of art, but I agree with that American author who lives in England—ah, yes, Henry James

is his name—that the *Victory* guiding the hero and his horse spoils the statue. With her anxious face and her hand uplifted in warning, she looks as if she were afraid that the automobiles might run into him, and was trying to stop them. You have seen pictures of it, of course?"

Jolan and Sandor remained standing, in the expectant attitude that suggests departure. But the Stranger sat down with great self-possession, took a cigarette from the table, and looked at it with great interest. "Madame permits, I know," he said.

"Why," he continued, "this is my favorite brand. I congratulate you, Sandor, they are very hard to get. I always carry a supply with me, and I am almost out of them. I must wire for a fresh supply. Meanwhile you can tell me where you got those. They are most soothing to nerves and brain. I suspect that there is just a trace of opium in them, but what matter? You know this is the tobacco that is specially raised for the Sultan and the Khedive. I believe that the Czar, the Emperor,

and King Edward are supplied with them, as a special courtesy. I receive them in the same way. Where *did* you get them? Now that I think of it, I gave you one or two of them at Monte Carlo—you remember?"

Sandor glanced at the man. He was holding in his long, tapering fingers one of the cigarettes that the tobacconist had sent him that day—the cigarettes that had soothed him over there on the lounge, and evoked visions. But he kept silence. Jolan made an impatient movement. The Stranger smiled to himself, a mocking smile which gave a sardonic upward twist to the corners of his mouth. He lighted the cigarette, crossed his legs comfortably, and continued:

"Now you both want me to go. You think that the tact of a man of the world, the tact that does not look beyond the present moment, should tell me so."

Sandor nodded with a frankness that was insulting in its decision.

"Well, now, I am not a man of ordinary tact—mine is extraordinary. The tact that in inter-

national affairs is called diplomacy. I have been in the diplomatic service, you know. I have had charge of some very important negotiations. If I tell you this, it is only to assure you again of my social status and of my discretion."

"Again discretion," murmured Jolan, with helpless fury. There was something devilish in the way in which this man had insulted them both, and yet had succeeded in remaining there, forced them to accept his company, and ended by dominating the situation.

"To return to the subject of tact," pursued the Stranger, "or, rather, to what tact requires in our situation. You both suggest, with a silence that is far more eloquent than words, that in your opinion I cannot do better than take my leave."

"Indeed, your presence is very disagreeable to me," said Jolan with decision.

"I knew it, I felt it," avowed the Stranger, frankly; "and you will understand me when I say that I would much rather take my hat and go than prolong this embarrassing situation.

But let us look a little further. I leave here, as you wish me to do. Your husband arrives to fetch you home. 'How is the portrait getting on?' he says. 'I have not even begun it,' says Sandor. Your husband is astonished. He probably has tact enough to say nothing before Sandor, but he thinks to himself. 'Well, then, what have they been doing together this whole hour and more?' You feel, of course, what he is thinking. Guilt does not make us nearly so uneasy as false appearances. Monsieur Vörröss's wonder, uneasiness—I will not call it suspicion—gets into the atmosphere of this bachelor's home. It is the very place to breed suspicions in a husband's heart. So, either Sandor and you begin to make voluble explanations—of the truth, of course—or you keep an embarrassed silence, and in either case you communicate the wrong look of the thing that struck me, to the very man who should be kept in utter ignorance, for Madame's sake and his own. With or without explanation, the husband begins to wonder. On the way home, in the carriage, he preserves a gloomy silence. He looks

at his wife sideways; she blushes for no reason at all—and none can tell how far things will go. Now do you see the soundness of the apparently tactless tact that bids me stay on, painfully aware though you make me feel that I am unwelcome? Nothing has been done, and here is Dr. Nicholas. We'll say nothing of the chair; it might cause new complications. If I may suggest it, Madame had better put on her blouse again. Monsieur Vörösss might be ahead of time. And don't forget to put on your hat, Madame. Let us go into the studio, Sandor."

"I will go there," said Jolan, hastily taking up blouse and hat. The Stranger's logic had impressed her; she was anxious now to fall in with his plan. Sandor opened the door for her and came back to his unwelcome visitor, seating himself on the lounge at the table.

"She is beautiful," said that worthy from the depths of the Gothic chair, in a colorless voice void of all intention, "and she has temperament enough to make a man happy. What an inspiration she would be to a man of genius."

"Monsieur Vörös is very successful, one of our greatest merchants," answered Sandor, formally. "Pardon me, but suppose we talk of something else?"

"Certainly, certainly," agreed the other, hastily, "but you misunderstand me. I was not going to discuss the lady; I was thinking of you. A great merchant! What need has he of a temperament like that? It is thrown away upon him—a wasted life that might find its fulfilment as one long inspiration to an artist."

Jolan re-entered the room, her cloak over her arm, her hat on her head, and sat down at a little distance.

"I am just discussing a pet theory of mine with Sandor," said the Stranger, who had risen with the painter, and now sat down again.

"You know how moody the great artist is? You, too, have your moments of deep dejection, have you not, Sandor?—hours when you doubt your talent, your future—moments when you question whether it is all worth while. You have felt in your depression as if it would be best to end it all. I see I have guessed right.

Well, now, I associate much with artists, with painters and poets—they interest me, they give me a welcome change, a mental stimulus after hours, nay, weeks of intense labor."

Sandor was beginning to be interested. Did he not know it, this utter dejection, this harrowing doubt of himself, this despair of reaction with which he paid for success and inspiration?

"Now," continued the Stranger, "I have a theory that accounts for this swing of the pendulum from exaltation to despair. You see, the genius puts months, years, of his vitality, of the mysterious something that makes him what he is, into a few weeks of intensest work. Sometimes part of the inspiration comes from without—he may have an interesting subject; but even so it has to *live* during those weeks upon what is within him. He draws upon his vitality, upon his stock of genius recklessly in advance. The work is finished, the fire suddenly dies out, he collapses. He needs a counter influence to strengthen him, to tide him over this period of physical and temperamental

destitution. If that counter influence be strong enough, the reaction may even be entirely eliminated. What is that influence? Now, listen, for this is my theory. Look into the work of the world's greatest masters. You will find in nearly every case that with their masterpieces is linked the name of the Beloved Woman. Her name may be unknown to the world, her identity an unsolved puzzle; she may share his glory only anonymously, the unthinking, the common mass may not know of her at all. But there she is. What was the inspiration of 'Tristan und Isolde?' The One Woman, the woman of temperament, who understands, who gives of herself freely, lovingly, for his sake first of all, but, if she be truly his mate, for the sake of his art as well. She effaces herself when the inspiration seizes him; she is not jealous of that rival in his affections, her collaborator in the building of the temple of his greatness. She rests while he works and consumes his vitality with reckless prodigality, counting not the cost; she lays up a store of her temperament for his return from the arms

of that other mistress, exhausted, depressed, to her arms, and she gives of it from her inexhaustible riches of love, that he may recover the quicker—may escape paying the cost altogether."

The Stranger mounted the chair, speaking over its back, as from a pulpit—Jolan and Sandor on either side of him. Suddenly he reached over, joined their hands, and extended his own in a gesture that was a travesty of blessing.

"Ah!" he said, "what a wonderfully beautiful pair you would make—thus, you two!"

Jolan turned away, pressing her hand to her forehead.

It had grown very dark now in the room, but the fire flamed up again, casting its dark reds far into the room, crimsoning the Gothic chair from which the Stranger had descended. He stood in its deepest shadow, and continued softly, as from afar:

"That is why the world that lives by the intellect as well as by the emotions, the world that understands, is grateful to the One Woman who through the ages has enriched its treasures

of art and of achievement. She serves that world through the man of whom her grandeur makes her the worthy mate."

Jolan was now seated by Sandor's side. She could not have told when or how she had taken that place. Both hung in eager silence upon the voice of the unseen man, reaching them softly, persuasively, out of the gloom.

"The genius who does not find the Woman," it continued slowly, the words dropping one by one into their consciousness, "will burn up the tissue of his gift before he has reached the fulness of his powers. And if he has found her and she withholds herself from him because she places her name, her position, fancied duties and obligations above the mission for which she was sent into the world, she is his murderess, even though she return his love in the secret chambers of her heart."

The two figures on the lounge had drawn closer together. Their hands were clasped, but they knew it not, intent as they were on the significance of the words out of the dark that had awakened the echo slumbering within them.

The fire flamed up again and cast a lurid light upon the Stranger's figure. He stood erect, intensely straining towards these two. His face was a startling contrast of high purplish lights and darkest shadows. His eyes burned in caverns of impenetrable blackness, and he smiled to himself, gleefully, satanically. He looked the incarnation of evil, but the two saw him not, preoccupied with the revelation of their inmost selves, come to them from without.

The Stranger once more mounted on the seat of the chair and leaned over its high back, with a low laugh of derision. They heard it not. Then he grew intense again in attitude and look. He pitched his voice lower still, making it infinitely more convincing and more seductive. It affected them as if they themselves were saying softly aloud the thoughts that were welling up from the profundities of their denied passion.

"Honor, duty, respectability, what are they but high-sounding names for the bonds that keep the common herd from breaking loose

and perishing in chaos like the animals of the fields, dragging with them all beauty, all intellect, the work of the small minority that makes life worth the living. Shackles put upon the mob by the few that really live for their own preservation."

The voice changed again, and now the speaker rose to his full height. He put all his energy into his speech, his arched brows drawn together in a frown of commanding purpose.

"Have you missed that influence in your life, Sandor Tatray?" he asked. "Do you not know where the Woman can be found if you be but strong enough to take her? Are you content to remain the talented painter of women, whose reputation will die a decade after his death? Do you not aspire to paint your masterpiece, to write your name on the scroll of the Immortals? Is your genius to flicker out and die because you dare not act as they did, because you dare not demand your right, which cannot be judged by the moral laws of weaklings, dare not take what is your own, in the face of silly conventionalities? Are you really not of their

stature, Sandor? And is your love not great enough?

"You, Jolan, do you not know whose is the temperament that will cause his genius to blossom and bear its fruit, that can give a new joy enduring to all the world? Do you put an unloved husband, a palace, security, the respect of your circle of mediocrities, above the great mission that life has bestowed upon you? You have denied your love its due, will you deny it to his great need?"

Jolan gave a sob. Tears were rolling softly down her cheeks. Her face burned, her heart leaped up within her with an impulse of utter surrender, in which there was no trace of self, made up entirely of loving service to the man.

"Sandor," she whispered, "Sandor!"

They turned towards each other, he put his arms around her, gently, reverently, their heads drew close together, the kiss that would seal them to each other trembled on their lips . . .

The bell rang. With a start they drew apart, brought back to reality from afar, from visions ecstatic beyond words, of glad surrender and eager taking.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVIL'S TACTICS

JOLAN and Sandor rose, their minds returning but slowly to the reality of their surroundings from the heights of exaltation. They peered at each other in the dark like two who, having long sought each other, have at last met and recognized the ties that drew them. The exaltation faded, but left in its place a serenity, like a pleasant awakening after a refreshing sleep. Sandor wondered. Was this the influence which he had lacked so long, the salvation from his fears, the banishment of his long periods of listless indifference? Had she already brought him the strength of which the Stranger had spoken? The One Woman!

She stepped dreamily into the centre of the room, a vague smile on her lips, her eyes staring vacantly at some vision of perfect happiness.

The bell rang again, peremptorily.

"My husband!" Jolan said, awakening with a start. "Oh!" The exclamation escaped her, significant of a world of perplexity and fear.

"Wake up, Sandor," said the Stranger, briskly. "I have been talking too much in this dim, warm room. It is a weakness of mine when I get upon that subject. Had you not better unlock the door so that your servant can get through to admit Monsieur Vörösss? And, if I were you, I would turn on the light."

Sandor did as he was bidden. André, who had evidently been waiting behind the closed door, anxious to do his duty, gave a wondering look at the trio, stared hard at the visitor, whom he certainly had not admitted and had never seen before, passed out in the hall, and a moment later ushered in Vörösss. Jolan and Sandor were standing now by the fire, facing each other. The Stranger had discreetly withdrawn into the background.

"Well, I am twenty minutes late," began the husband, briskly. "Not so bad for a busy man, eh? But that cable never came, and I waited till the last moment. I ordered it forwarded to

the house. It will be a welcome guest if it comes to our ball to-night. One of the biggest things I have ever pulled off."

He let André help him off with his fur-lined coat, handed him his hat and gloves, and came forward.

"Bitter cold," he continued, with his usual assurance that everything he said was of the greatest importance, "and snowing hard. I hope it will not keep our guests from coming." His vanity was set upon the success of the affair, which in a way was his official announcement of his desire to be ranked thereafter among the acknowledged money kings of the world.

"You have quite a color, Jolan," he went on, with the irritating assertion of approving proprietorship that is a characteristic of the remarks addressed in public by so many elderly husbands to their handsome young wives.

Then he fondly touched her cheek.

Jolan shrank a little under this exhibition of uxuriousness. She had been used to it for six years, she had learned to take it with an air of unconsciousness; in fact, most of the time she was

really unconscious of it. But now! She gave a hasty glance at Sandor. who was looking away.

"And now the portrait," continued the pompous voice. "How have we been getting along this first hour? Quite satisfactorily, eh, quite satisfactorily? Of course, with such a subject and such a painter!" He gave two stately, patronizing bows. Quite a neatly turned compliment, he thought.

"The fact is," began Sandor, hesitatingly, "that we have done nothing at all."

"Nothing at all? But then—what *have* you been doing for an hour and a half?"

He took a swift, alert look at the painter, then at his wife. Both read in that look more than it really conveyed—a dawning suspicion.

The Stranger here sauntered easily forward from behind the shelter of the draped easel on which he had been admiring a spirited sketch of Fanny in Hungarian peasant costume. He was the perfectly mannered, perfectly dressed, distinguished Stranger again.

Sandor welcomed him in his heart.

"Dr. Nicholas," he said, swiftly. "Monsieur Vöröss."

The two bowed ceremoniously, the Stranger with his usual quiet dignity, a little haughtily, the merchant with profound respect. He knew the stamp of the *grand seigneur* so well. He endeavored so hard to imitate it.

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Monsieur Vöröss," said the Stranger, "but it is only a pleasure anticipated by a few hours, for I met Prince Vasarhely in Paris, the other day, and he gave me a letter of introduction to you. You have had extensive business dealings with him, he told me. Forests in the Bukowina, I believe."

"Just so, just so," assented Vöröss, much gratified. "He has real business talent, even though he is an army man."

"That is high praise from you, but I received the same impression. His wife, it seems, doubts this a little. She and I are very old friends."

Vöröss was duly impressed. A man of such distinction calling himself Dr. Nicholas? Some great noble in disguise, no doubt, perhaps a prince of royal blood? He must be at the ball to-night,

he resolved at once. He must tell Jolan to invite him before they left the studio. He glanced at her. She was seated in one of the armchairs near the fire, talking desultorily with Sandor. The Stranger, too, looked in their direction. Vöröss caught the look, as it was intended that he should. He looked again, conscious of an unaccountable feeling of irritation.

"Budapest has beautified itself since I was here last," resumed the other, having waited just long enough to let the picture of his wife and the artist stamp itself upon the husband's mind.

"Yes," somewhat absent-mindedly; "we are very proud of our little capital on the Donau. There is a great deal of public spirit here."

"I am sorry that I cannot stay long enough to inspect all your improvements."

"Your visit here will be a short one?"

"Yes, I leave to-night for China. I am going to look into the coal deposits there. This question of fuel is beginning to be a serious one for manufacturers."

"You are a manufacturer?"

"Well, no, not exactly; but I am the owner of

an enormous plant, and the coal it consumes is really ruinous. I have tried oil—but you know the head of that industry?"

"A most remarkable man," said Vörösss, with reverence for the possessor of so much money.

"A most remarkable man," assented the Stranger. "I look forward with much pleasure to making his acquaintance by-and-by. But his oil costs me more than the coal."

"I have tried denatured alcohol in my factories with rather satisfactory results."

"I tried that, too, but they drank it faster than I could buy it."

"Drank it!" exclaimed Vörösss, aghast. Who? Your firemen? Did it not kill them?"

"Not a bit of it. Nothing can kill them. One of them told me that it was the best stuff he had tasted since he used to spend his summer vacations in Maine."

Vörösss was a little puzzled. So he changed the conversation.

"You talk Hungarian without any accent," he observed, "yet you are not one of us. I would know you, I think, if you were."

"No, I have not the pleasure of being a countryman of yours. In fact, I am a citizen of the world, and it is only by constant moving about that I succeed in preserving my incognito. You know my name, Monsieur Vöröss, yet you will never connect it with my person. But then, I never have it announced in the Court Circular that I am going to such and such a place incognito."

"Ah, ha!" said the merchant to himself; "he has given himself away, and does not know it. I was right—a royal prince in disguise. He shall come to the ball, and I will let them know, mysteriously, that he is an exalted personage. I will pretend, of course, that I know who he is."

The other watched him with a twinkle in his eye. He read his mind as clearly as if he had spoken the words aloud.

"You see, my dear Monsieur Vöröss, that I do not mind taking you into my confidence. I know that I am safe, even though you would be much astonished if I told you my name. If somebody else told you, the chances are that you would not believe him. We were bound to meet, you and I. The world of business, as you transact it, and mine,

which has for ages looked down upon it, are drawn so close together nowadays."

"I catch your idea, Monseigneur," said the flattered merchant. "The Czar is interested in timber lands, the Emperor distills denatured alcohol, King Leopold sells rubber and mahogany, King Edward is interested in the stock markets, and you—"

"A half word goes a long way with you, Monsieur Vörösss," smiled the Stranger. "I am a little interested in all these things, and in many others, and the result is that I use more coal each year."

Jolan and Sandor had endeavored hard during this conversation to assume an unconcerned demeanor, and to talk naturally on indifferent topics. Both felt uneasy, guilty; the woman remorseful. But fear was uppermost in her mind. This uncanny man, come she knew not whence nor how, had her good name, her future tran quillity, in his keeping. One unguarded word, one allusion made with malicious intent, would suffice to rouse in her husband the demon of jealousy, whose existence, well guarded, she had long

known. She lent but half an ear to Sandor's labored commonplaces, avoiding his eyes that spoke of other things, straining hard to overhear what these other two were saying. The Stranger was exerting his charm, and succeeding, she could see. But for what purpose? Sandor, following her glances, asked himself the same question. A sudden thought darted through his mind. The man was young, handsome in a striking fashion, of a charming distinction of manner, evidently well born, and rich. Why was he exerting himself so much to please that pompous, middle-aged moneybag? Did he plan to reach the wife through the husband? The suspicion grew almost immediately into a certainty. So that was it? A raging jealousy awoke in him who had never given a thought to the husband.

The Stranger and Vöröss now approached the two at the fire, still chatting animatedly.

"Fancy, Jolan," said Laszlo, with exaggerated interest, "Dr. Nicholas is a friend of the Vasarhelys. They have been telling him about our new house and the house-warming to-night. He

knows all about it." He glanced at her significantly.

Unwillingly, a premonition warning her, Jolan felt compelled to extend the invitation unmistakably suggested to her.

"Perhaps Dr. Nicholas will give us the pleasure of coming to-night, if he has nothing better to do."

"Yes, we shall be delighted."

"I accept with much pleasure, indeed. Truth to tell, I am anxious to see this new house of which I have heard so much. I understand it is one of the ornaments of Budapest."

"Not—not bad," murmured Vörösss, with an insufferable assumption of modesty, And, in the exuberance of his joy at having secured so distinguished a guest, he added with jocular mysteriousness:

"Since Sandor is such an old friend of Dr. Nicholas, I may perhaps commit the indiscretion of telling him that he is expected to make a most interesting announcement in the course of the evening."

"O, ho! Sandor, you sly boy, and you never said

a word. I understand, you are going to be married! Happy you! Now your talent will produce its best. The One Woman, eh? The only true inspiration for an artist."

Jolan started inwardly.

"Yes," continued her husband (oh, how could he be so garrulous, how could he give such an exhibition of bad taste)—"Yes, we flatter ourselves that this is a little our work, or rather my wife's."

Jolan felt a sinking of the heart, a dull despair. Was it possible that she had done this thing, that she had worked assiduously for many weeks to bestow this, her greatest treasure, upon another? Yes, it was her own deed. The gnawing pain grew into jealousy, almost hatred.

The Stranger was watching her closely.

"Perhaps," he suggested gently, "I have seen this lady's portrait just now?"

"You mean the one on the easel?" asked Vörösss, with elephantine humor. "No, no; you are on delicate ground now. That is Fanny, the famous Fanny, Tatray's model. But that is all over and done with now. What!"

He laughed the fat laugh of the man who wishes to insinuate that he, too, has been a gay dog in his day.

Jolan did not heed him. She had reached a crisis. She could endure no more. This Stranger, with his easy perfection of manner, stumbled, in his ignorance, upon every fact that hurt her. First Sandor's marriage, now the model! The jealousy gnawing at her heart bit deep. She shuddered, then got up.

"It is time for us to go," she said.

But Vörösss had strolled over to Fanny's picture, and Sandor had followed him. They were standing before it now, discussing some detail of costume. Jolan took a sudden resolution.

"I must speak to you a moment alone," she said to Dr. Nicholas. "Here, now, before we leave."

"I will arrange it, Madame. I am always at your service. Leave it to me."

"Sandor," he said, raising his voice, "you have not shown Monsieur Vörösss the charcoal sketch for the portrait. Madame just spoke of it."

"Then you did work a little? Just now you

said that you had done nothing at all." The merchant looked dissatisfied.

"Oh, well, I am not content with it," rejoined the painter, negligently. "It is not worth looking at. I am not going to use it."

"Never mind, I should like to see it."

"Go into the studio with them," said Dr. Nicholas under his breath to Jolan, "then make some pretext—say that it is cold in there—and rejoin me."

She obeyed him unquestioningly, wondering a little the while. Walking to the door, she passed through it as Sandor held it open for her, followed by her husband. The door was shut again. Dr. Nicholas was alone.

He rubbed his hands, then he smiled, finally he laughed silently. He strolled to the table, took another cigarette, and murmured gleefully:

"The situation is developing. We certainly have progressed far this afternoon. Everybody is jealous of everybody else, and they all dance to my pulling of the strings. Oh, it is an old game, but these poor mortals never seem to learn wisdom. The woman is suffering from a reaction.

I had foreseen that. We had better have Fanny on the scene. That will be another turn of the screw."

He turned expectantly towards the door leading into the hall. A moment, and then—a knock.

"Come in."

Fanny, looking contrite and humble entered timidly.

"Well, my dear, what do you want?"

"I want to see Monsieur Tatray."

"Is it very important?"

"Oh yes, sir." The poor girl wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, twisted nervously into a tight little ball.

"Well, Monsieur Tatray is busy—very important. You cannot see him now. Go in there." He began to lead her gently towards the door of the bedroom. "I shall attend to it for you."

He turned the key behind her, and came back to the centre of the room. "We will keep Fanny in reserve," he murmured.

Jolan came in hastily.

"Sir," she said, firmly, "I have come to ask you to revoke your acceptance of my invitation. I gave it under pressure. You surely will not come when I tell you frankly that you are not wanted. I do not know who you are, or where you come from. You were there, suddenly—oh, no; you were not in that chair when I arrived. You had hidden yourself.

"Leave me alone, I beg of you; do not unsettle me with your theories. I have been loyal to my husband in word and deed for six years. I have nothing to reproach myself with. I do not love him, you know that—you who look people through and through. Why should I deny it? But I respect him, and still more, I respect myself. Honor, fidelity, respectability may be idle words to you; to me they mean everything. Just now I was carried away by your false logic—I cannot explain it, I cannot understand it. But I have regained command of myself. I will do my duty as I see it to the end."

"Madame, so much has happened this afternoon, that I do not wonder you are upset. You do not want me to come to your ball because you

are afraid that I might be indiscreet. You may rely upon me. Your secret and Sandor's, which I surprised, and you no longer deny—why should you?—will never pass my lips."

Jolan stared at him with renewed fear. The man's reasoning was now unanswerable. If he chose to relate—what could she do? False appearances, he had said. Well, they were against her. She must rely upon his honor. She took a rapid resolution.

"Listen," she said; "you say that you leave tomorrow, perhaps never to return. What are we to you? You will not come?"

"I will not come, Madame, as you desire, unless—well, unless you invite me again in the presence of your husband. Is that a bargain?"

"You will certainly not come," she smiled, gaily. "Pardon my rudeness."

"A charming woman is never rude, Madame Vöröss. Rudeness in her we call caprice."

"Now you are nice again. Let us shake hands, and bear no malice."

Dr. Nicholas took her hand, and, as Sandor was

entering the room, kissed it, looking at the painter out of the corner of his eye. Vöröss followed immediately afterward.

"Well, how about the sketch?" said Dr. Nicholas, pleasantly.

"Sandor does not like it, so that settles it. Come, Jolan, we must go home. Till to-night, then, Dr. Nicholas."

"Dr. Nicholas has just told me that he cannot possibly come. He has important matters to attend to."

"Too bad, too bad, can you not look in for a moment?"

"I am afraid it is impossible. I have thanked Madame and made my excuses. I lose a pleasant evening, more's the pity."

"Well, we regret this exceedingly. Come, Jolan, I am anxious about that cable."

"Pardon me," said Dr. Nicholas, with sudden interest, "but does it refer to that transaction in arms and blankets for the Russian army?"

"How do you know? It is a deep secret."

"Ah, Monsieur Vöröss, I am in a situation where I know everything that is going on. Take

my advice, do not close that deal. You can do better."

"But how do you know?"

"Ah, that is a long story. The situation in the Far East will change shortly very much. I have not all the facts yet; I shall not have them until later in the evening. Sorry that I shall have no opportunity to explain things to you at length, for, of course, you cannot be expected to take my unsupported word for it."

"But this is of the utmost importance to me, sir." Vöröss's voice trembled with excitement. "Can I not see you for a moment—can you not drop in for an hour later in the evening? Jolan, do beg Dr. Nicholas to come to-night. There is more at stake than your sable cloak."

Obediently, against her will, frightened by this unmistakably adroit management, Jolan murmured:

"Do come, Dr. Nicholas, if only for a moment. Can we count on you?"

"Madame, I am your servant. Yes, I will manage it. You may count on me."

"And now home," said Vöröss, joyously. "Be

sure that you come early, Sandor," he added.

"I shall probably be a little late. I expect an intimate friend who will keep me for some time."

Jolan stepped forward and took the painter's hand as Dr. Nicholas and her husband walked towards the entrance.

"Good-bye, Sandor," she said, softly, "and farewell. We shall never meet again alone. I am sorry, and yet I am glad that this has happened, but you see that it is impossible for you to paint my picture. It won't do, my friend, it won't do. My friend! Ah, yes; you will always be that, won't you? Marry Vilma, Sandor, and protect me against myself, against ourselves. I will remain an honest, an honorable woman."

At this moment there was a loud knock at the door of the bedroom. Sandor looked puzzled.

"The friend you expect, no doubt," said Dr. Nicholas, going toward it. "Shall I open it, Sandor?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned the key, admitting Fanny.

"You wish to see me, Mademoiselle?" Sandor looked disconcerted. "Please be seated," he

added gruffly. Fanny sniffed, and applied the ball of filmy linen to her eyes.

Dr. Nicholas smiled discreetly; Vörösss winked. His wife saw both wink and smile.

"That is the famous Fanny," he told her, *sotto voce*, for her edification. Jolan, a high color on her cheeks, did not answer, but turned towards the chair on which were lying her cloak and gloves.

"Had we not better go?" suggested the Doctor, discreetly.

André came in, and began to help Vörösss into his overcoat. Dr. Nicholas held Jolan's cloak for her.

"I will return in a moment," he whispered over her shoulder, "and put an end to this *tête-à-tête*."

"What is it to me?" she answered, scornfully; but there were tears in her eyes, and her lips trembled.

"It is improper." She caught the gleeful smile over her shoulder in the Venetian glass. "It is improper. I have strong convictions in such matters. Think of his engagement to-night, and then—after what has happened this afternoon!"

Jolan walked briskly towards the entrance,

looking neither to right nor left, and joined her husband. Sandor was standing by the table, ill at ease, undecided what to do. His departing guests took no further notice of him.

"Here, André, my coat," said Dr. Nicholas, briskly thrusting a garment into the servant's hands, and slipping into it. "Now my hat and my gloves. So, take care of my bag, will you? You hadn't seen it before? Well, there it is, and it is heavy enough to be felt as well as seen."

"Monsieur is to pass the night here?"

"Yes, I am going to the ball with your master. See to my dress clothes and things, yes? There's a good man."

Dr. Nicholas slapped his hat on his head and hurried after Monsieur and Madame Vörösss, overtaking them as they were about to enter their carriage.

"To-night then, Doctor," said its owner.

"To-night, with pleasure." And looking into the carriage, he added the customary Hungarian phrase, "I kiss your hand, gracious lady."

As the footman closed the carriage door, he cried gaily:

"I have to go back. This is not my coat." Jolan saw him standing on the sidewalk, a smile on his face, as they drove off.

CHAPTER V

THE DEVIL'S PARABLE

THE moment the door closed behind his fleeing guests, Sandor turned angrily to Fanny.

"Why did you come back?" he asked, sternly. "Have I not told you to keep out of the way when I had callers?"

"I thought that you wanted me, Sandor," she faltered. "I was sitting in the café, waiting to see if you would come in, and then I felt as if you were calling me, as if I were needed. I ran all the way, Sandor; I could hear your voice."

"Nonsense. Nerves, or—are you making this up?"

"No, no, Sandor! It's the truth."

"How did you get in?"

"The outside door wasn't locked. I was in such a hurry that I tried it before I rang."

"The door was open! Again!"

"And then that strange gentleman let me in here. I knocked, Sandor; honestly, I knocked."

"He let you in? And then?"

"He pushed me into your bedroom and told me to wait. Then I thought you called me and I tried to come in, but the door was locked. So I knocked."

"And Dr. Nicholas let you in."

Sandor had repeated her words mechanically, a look of enlightenment on his face.

"Well," he continued, "you have placed me in a nice situation. What did you come back for, anyhow?"

"Won't you forgive me, Sandor, for what I said this afternoon? Do, please, forgive me. I'll be good. I promise never to be jealous again."

"That's all right, Fanny. Don't cry any more now."

"Are you really going to get married to that rich young lady?"

"Yes."

"And that other—the one you really love, the married one . . . "

"Fanny! Stop it! How dare you begin again! Here, I'll give you a glass of Tokay . . . Or have you already had just a little bit more than is good for you . . . No? Then it's nerves? All right, we will set that in order. Now make yourself comfortable. Let me help you off with your jacket."

Fanny obediently held out her arm, and, as she slipped out of the sleeve, fondly pressed herself against his breast, putting her arms around his neck, and drawing his head down to her lips.

Dr. Nicholas came in at this moment.

"Really, Sandor," he said, mockingly, "you shock me. Every time I come in I find you busy helping ladies to change from dresses to draperies. It's all right, but you should at least see to it that your locks are in order. It is criminal in a bachelor to neglect this greatest of all precautions. Why, you would end by compromising someone. Your servant gave me the wrong coat a moment ago. I return for my own, try your door, it opens—just like that. I enter here, and find you engaged in what

appears to be the chief occupation of your life. Suppose I had been this lady's husband?"

"I have no husband, sir," said Fanny, indignantly.

"Pardon me, Mademoiselle, for this apparent reflection upon your virtue. You are not married, Sandor is not married; Mrs. Grundy herself could not have a word to say."

"Who is Mrs. Grundy?" asked Fanny.

"She is a lady with no brains, a malicious tongue, and a prurient imagination, Mademoiselle Fanny. She has relatives in America, I believe."

André entered.

"The house agent about the lease again, sir. He says he must know before twelve o'clock to-night."

"Tell him I cannot see him. I don't know yet . . . I haven't decided . . . "

"You *are* going to get married?" burst out Fanny, "Oh, oh!"

"I will see him," said Sandor, irritably. "Dr. Nicholas, you are a physician? Well, anyhow, see if you cannot help her."

"You had better stay away for a little while, then. I am afraid that you have upset her. And oh, send in some tea, and don't forget the rum."

"Now then, Mademoiselle Fanny, let us sit down," said Dr. Nicholas, in his softest manner, when Sandor had gone, "and let us talk a little. You love Sandor, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, I love him very, very dearly."

"You only think you love him. You have loved before, have you not?"

"But never, never like this."

"Of course not, and you have never lost like this before?"

"I shall never get over it."

"You will, dear child, you will. I will help you. An inconsolable Fanny would be of no earthly use to me."

"What do *you* want of me?"

"I wish you to be gay and happy, to forget Sandor, to fall in love with that young student . . . "

"He *is* nice," admitted the model, with considerable animation, "but," dolefully, "he is not Sandor, famous and great."

"He will be great some day, Fanny, and the first book of poems that will bring him fame will be all about you. You remember it was your portrait that brought Sandor good fortune?"

"Yes, it was printed all over the world. It is in the picture shops now, in beautiful colors, for 20 guldens." Fanny's eyes shone with happiness. Then her eyes clouded again.

"And now he is going to send me away," she concluded, tearfully.

"Poor little thing," said Dr. Nicholas, softly to himself, "with your intense joys and your shallow griefs—all emotion, all impulse, a sinner who harms no one but herself. And yet people believe that I seek to destroy you. How little they know me! What should I do with you? What honor would there be, what satisfaction, in a conquest so easy, so insignificant? Mine is the realm of the pride of intellect, of the arrogance of ruthless achievement, of the master-spirits of this earth. Where should I place you? With Messalina and Faustina? Go your little way, bring some sunshine into the

lives of budding artists. You need fear no harm from me."

"You are talking in a strange tongue, Monsieur," said Fanny, interested again.

"Here's our tea. Now, one lump, two lumps for you? Right, and a little rum. No lemon? Very well. Now a sandwich. And lemon for me *and* sugar, *and* rum, *and* a bit of caviar. Now we are comfy."

Fanny fell to eating ravenously, stopping from time to time to wipe her eyes, an operation which soon became unnecessary. The rum revived her spirits and ere long she was telling this sympathetic, entertaining stranger all the successive events of her life—naively, with perfect confidence in his comprehension.

"And now the end has come," she concluded, dolefully. "Sandor loves me no longer."

"Let me tell you a secret, Fanny. I have already told you that your student will be famous. Now, listen. You are going to like him very much, so much that you will not care whether Sandor marries or not."

"It is impossible."

"But it is true. Now, go and sleep well and don't cry, for it spoils your lovely eyes."

Obediently, Fanny allowed him to help her with her jacket. Then, at the door, she turned and said:

"Good-bye, Monsieur, and thank you. You have made me feel much better."

Dr. Nicholas sat down again, lighted a cigarette and made himself a cup of fresh tea. Sandor returned.

"Have you got rid of her?" he asked, in astonishment.

"Yes; she has gone home."

"That is something to worry about, too. She is so impulsive and she loves me so much, I really dread to think of what she may do when she sees that all is really over. She may throw herself into the Donau."

"My dear Sandor, what an inexperienced boy you are and what a timid sinner! Fanny throw herself into the Donau? Why, she will console herself for your loss within a month."

"You don't know her."

"I know all her kind."

"But she loves me to distraction."

"That's the only way in which she can love while it lasts. She has loved to distraction before, she will love to distraction again. She will be teaching young men their A B C's of love when she is forty-five. Really, Sandor, you are too ingenuous. But, of course, she will come back several times before she forgets you."

"Let us sit by the fire," said Sandor, briefly. The two rose and went over to the fireplace, Sandor picking up the package of cigarettes and switching off the lights.

"So! this is cosy," he said.

He placed a low smoking-table between them, leaned back in his chair, and closely scrutinized the face of the strange guest, who, in some unaccountable manner, had in a few hours wrested from him the great secret of his life, who appeared to know all his past, and Jolan's and Vörösss's.

Whence did he come? Who was he? With all his frankness and the volubility of his explanations, he remained the enigma he had been

on the terrace at Monte Carlo. Well, here he was, the visitor of a night, entitled to hospitality. On the morrow he would disappear, mysteriously as he had come, perhaps never to return again. Why not make the best of him?

"Of course you will dine with me and stay overnight?"

"With pleasure, Sandor. The fact is, I counted on you. But after dinner I shall have to leave you for a while and go on direct to the ball. Nor do I know when I shall return to-morrow morning. More mystery, you see. I wish that I could tell you more, but let it suffice that Budapest is midway between Vienna and Constantinople."

André entered the room and looked questioningly at his master.

"Dr. Nicholas will dine here, André."

"Very well, sir."

While they were waiting for dinner, the host and his guest sat silent. The Devil was resting, content to let what had already been done sink deep into the emotional nature of the artist. He knew what Sandor was thinking about, the

struggle between his higher and his lower self that was going on in his breast. He foresaw the resolution he would take, and with confident, sardonic amusement anticipated the delight of upsetting it before they parted to meet again at the Vöröss ball.

"Dinner is served," said André, standing aside at the door. The two entered the small dining-room, cosy with its heavy oak and white napery and silver, under the steady, soft candle-light, and sat down.

A thin soup and sherry, paprika chicken and champagne, a *strudel,* some sheep cheese with more paprika, a demi-tasse and some fiery brandy: the meal was simple, but cooked to perfection, and Dr. Nicholas made it a feast. He charmed Sandor away from the dark mood in which Fanny represented a repugnant past, done with beyond recall; Jolan an unattainable present; Vilma an indifferent future.

Dr. Nicholas talked on desultorily, gradually shortening the intervals of silence in which the painter would indulge in his depressing thoughts. The range of his informa-

tion, the sharp decison of his opinions and judgments, which with a single turn of phrase revealed the conventionality of accepted standards, achieved their work. Sandor became interested.

Politics, travel, history, culture and civilization in their varying manifestations among the nations of the earth, anecdote, just one or two good stories, the true inwardness of the current scandal in the highest of high life—if ever guest "paid for his dinner," it was Dr. Nicholas that evening, never for a moment losing sight of his aim. The man had an inexhaustible stock of topics to draw upon, an infinite wealth of wit and wisdom to display and elucidate. When, towards the end of the dinner, he touched more definitely upon painting, Sandor, who had drunk most of the wine, was won. Dr. Nicholas had visited the great galleries of Europe, it appeared, not once, but a hundred times. He knew of masterpieces hung in dark corners, unrecognized as yet; he spoke of weaknesses in collections; and the great private galleries, it was evident, had always been open to

him. Here was a man from whom he could learn much in his own chosen field, Sandor reflected, whether it were of Velasquez or Sargent, Frans Hals or Whistler, Rembrandt or Holbein. And he had an unerring eye for beginners. He reeled off names that had come within Tatray's observation in the art reviews, with illuminating remarks on the work connected with each, making daring yet well-connected transitions from Budapest to Munich, to Berlin, to Rome, to Madrid and Paris, to London and New York.

"Painting," he said, "there lies the future of American art. They think it is music over there, but it isn't. They have the opera fashion and the conductor craze; a cultured minority is delicately receptive to music, but I doubt if the majority will ever learn to like anything better than *musiquette*. I am certain that they will never find the true expression of their artistic temperament in that medium. The Anglo-Saxon formative influence has been too strong. However, we shall see. They certainly are doing interesting things over there.

You will visit the country, Sandor, some time, when New York is the new Rome, the empress of the modern world."

"Who knows? We do not pay enough attention to American art over here; we are blinded by their huge material achievements and by the magnitude of their scandals."

"Yes, we suppress ours over here much more carefully," commented Dr. Nicholas, drily, "and the unthinking mass believes in consequence that it is morally far superior. No harm is done, since America looks down on Europe with the same self-congratulatory condescension."

"Let us go back to the den for another cigar before we begin to think of dressing," proposed Sandor, putting down his napkin and rising.

"By all means."

As the two re-entered the room, the fire, replenished by André, flared up and threw its glow upon them. Dr. Nicholas's face was set again; his eyes glowed with determination in their deep sockets, accentuated by the curiously arched brows. The arrow-point of coal black hair pointed to the eagle nose with its sensitive

nostrils, the mouth closed pitiless, the long, bony chin continuing the sharp effect in a shadow on the red cravat.

"It is warm in here," said Sandor, "we had better not go near the fire. Sit down, Doctor."

He flung himself upon the lounge, but the other strolled slowly around the room.

"It was most unfortunate," he began tentatively, "that Fanny should have come in this afternoon."

"Why?"

"Because it jarred upon the mood of the hour—Madame Vörösss's mood and yours, not to mention mine of benevolent interest in your case."

"Pardon me, but you force me a second time to suggest that we change the subject."

"I know that I have no right to speak, that I commit a breach of good taste, but—hang it all, Sandor, I know how things stand. I have surprised your secret and you know it. You are a young man. I am not so much older than you, though sometimes I feel as if the weight of ages rested upon me. I have seen

so much of the world, so much of unhappiness, of ecstasy lost through this respect for conventionality clothed in high-sounding words. Life is short, Sandor, and fleeting, and the fulness of it offers itself but once."

"You talk like the tempter . . . "

"Let us agree on that point," assented Dr. Nicholas with ironical smoothness. "I am the tempter—to what? I am not so much concerned with your happiness, the sunward flight of your genius; I am thinking of Jolan and what you are to her."

"I am nothing to her now. Henceforth we shall be good, frank friends, as we have been in the past. We shall be able to look her husband in the eyes without a tremor, I shall be able to clasp his hand honestly, and to honor him for what he did for me when I was poor."

"Why did he do it, Sandor? For love of art? He cannot distinguish between a daub and a Murillo. You were better out of the way, just then. Oh, simple, ingenuous Sandor!"

"I have known it, I have forgotten it! What matters the motive, since the end was good?"

"Spoken like a man. Do you have no thought for Jolan? Do you not know that she loves you to distraction—that you are all the universe to her, all her world of loving service, all her heaven of ecstasy? Does she count for nothing in your thoughts?"

"She will have tranquillity of mind, her honor, the respect of all her world."

"The morality of the slave! Have you never heard of the morality of the Master, Sandor, of the Higher Law that justifies the breaking of the Lower?"

The painter was silent. Often, in his midnight hours of hopeless longing, he had struggled with that problem.

"The higher law," whispered Dr. Nicholas, softly, seductively. "I always preach it—the morality of the Master."

Sandor wavered, his desire prompting his acceptance of the new creed. With a desperate effort of his waning will he turned from it, however, and rejoined:

"She told me that I must forget her."

"Don't you know women better than that?

She wishes to be taken; her love is too great, too noble to offer itself. She trembled in your presence, she clung to her husband's arm for protection—the instinct of the woman to delay the hour she knows must come. What is Vilma but another obstacle placed by her on the path you both must tread? Don't you see that the fate of both of you is in stronger hands than your own, that you both are playing but the old game of luring flight and ultimate capture, in all good faith—that there is to be no end to it but this?"

Dr. Nicholas came closer and knelt behind Sandor on the lounge where he was sitting, his elbows on his knees, his face buried in his hands.

"You have only to cast your eyes on her, and she is yours," continued the voice—"yours whenever you shall want her as she wants you. You have only to stretch out your arms and you hold her in your embrace. Another man must struggle a lifetime for a treasure such as you find in your path—"

"I do not want it! If she be not unapproach-

able, if she be not far beyond my boldest thought—I do not care for the treasure. The things we really value must be striven for, fought for, lived for!"

"Listen, Sandor, and you will understand. Last year—it was the sixth of September; the very date was impressed on me—I had a terrifying experience. I had ordered my man to put away my summer things and take out my heavier clothing. While putting on a waistcoat, I found in one of the pockets a gold coin —left there when it was laid away.

" 'Found money,' I said to myself, trying to remember when I had put it there. Suddenly it slipped from my fingers and rolled away. I stooped to pick it up, but could not see it. A trifle annoyed, I got down on my hands and knees. It had disappeared. Would you believe it?—I lost my temper. I moved all the furniture, I upset things. At this moment my valet came in and joined me in the search. The sweat rolled down my forehead. I swore. I was determined to find that coin. My rage increased—I, habitually cool, became gradually

frantic. In the irritation of the moment I turned on my servant and accused him of pocketing the coin. He has a nasty temper, has Antonio. His eyes sparkled and he whipped out a stilletto. I reached for my revolver . . ."

Dr. Nicholas took from his pocket a small revolver and laid it on the table within Sandor's reach and continued slowly:

"See? With this revolver I almost killed a human being for a small coin—a coin that I did not need and had known nothing about a moment before, but which had suddenly became precious as I saw it roll out of my reach."

"I—when I find money, I give it away as a tip."

"So do I. I meant to give it to Antonio as a tip, but you see it rolled away from me. What we lose, we run after. Such is man. *You* will run after your treasure so unexpectedly found, once you have lost it, and you will move heaven and earth to recover it.

"In the same way the value of this woman will grow in your eyes. You will suddenly

realize that you owe the wings of your inspiration to her, that without her it cannot soar aloft to the sun—that her breath was the breath of your life. When she rolls away, you will say to yourself, 'Only she could have made me happy!' Your art—you would give it up—give up everything in exchange for a caress."

Dr. Nicholas took up the shawl with which Jolan had covered herself and continued, ever lower, ever more temptingly:

"This is the shawl that has caressed her glorious shoulders . . ."

"Her glorious shoulders," repeated Sandor as in a dream.

"In her arms is the dreamland of the blest . . ."

The echo came back, softly, from afar, " . . . the blest!"

"Her hair has the fragrance of the sweetness of awakening spring . . . "

" . . . the sweetness!"

"Her eyes are like twin stars . . . "

" . . twin stars!"

"You are intended for each other, you were

fated to meet from the beginning of time—and you will it that you two shall live apart . . . "

"You are trying to tempt me. Stop! Stop!"

"The morality of the slave! You timid miser! I tell you, life is a treasure only when we freely spend it."

"Why do you say these things? What is your object? Who has sent you?"

Dr. Nicholas raised himself from his stooping position over the unseeing man's shoulder and frowned.

"Nobody has sent me. I came. I am here."

Sandor sat up. His face was pale and wrung with emotion. His voice trembled, but his purpose was firm.

"Well," he said, standing up and facing his tempter, "this is my decision. I don't want the gold coin."

Dr. Nicholas looked at him, long, steadily, inscrutably. Then he asked, with a slow distinctness of utterance, making each word tell:

"And when the treasure rolls away—when some one else possesses it?"

"Who?" shouted Sandor! "Who?"

"I! I myself."

The painter faced the man who was confronting him with iron decision expressed in his features, but an expectant look in his eyes. Thus they stood for a full minute, in silence, intent, watchful.

"You!" gasped Sandor, struggling for utterance, "You!"

"I. This very evening, to-night, she shall be mine. I'll make her follow me where I will! Ah! For six thousand years I have not had such a sweetheart!"

"You say—?"

"She has turned to you in the need of her longing heart and you have failed her. I will not fail her. The higher law rules in her breast; yours is the morality of the slave, mine of the Master! She will judge us, she will see, my sweetheart! She will bend to my will gladly, she who needs support so much. Come this evening, beneath the brilliant lights, into the perfumed air of her ball-room and learn how a beautiful woman is conquered . . ."

"Stop! Enough!"

"You will be there, Sandor, seeking the gold coin that has rolled away. You will know where she is when she is missing and cannot be found—with me! You will see us everywhere, you will hear us laughing, you will be groping on your knees for the treasure you have disdained . . . You will roam the streets all night, seeking, seeking, and we shall see you pass under our window, and smile, and embrace . . ."

"Stop! Stop! I say!"

"Yes, we'll smile at you, poor fool. And her laugh will be loudest . . ."

Sandor gave a cry of rage and snatched the revolver from the table. Dr. Nicholas grasped his hand and held it down with muscles of iron, without exertion. The fury of the artist suddenly died down; he bowed his head and stood motionless.

His adversary deliberately turned his back on him as André entered.

"Did you call, sir?"

"Yes; my coat. I have to go out for a little while."

The servant helped the Stranger into his fur-lined coat, handed him his hat and went out to open the door for him. Dr. Nicholas turned to Sandor, quietly took the revolver from his unresisting fingers and slipped it into his pocket.

"See, my poor boy," he said, very gently, with paternal admonishment, "for a gold coin that rolled away, you, too, would have killed a man."

CHAPTER VI

THE VÖRÖSS BALL

THE Vöröss mansion stood in grounds that proved louder than words that its owner could afford to buy city lots by the acre instead of the front foot. A heavy hand-wrought iron fence on a marble base, with imposing gates, high-arched, hanging on elaborately carved marble posts, surrounded it, giving full view of it to the admiring passer-by, yet keeping him at a proper distance from the abode of so much wealth and heightening the impression which the pile, with its vast marble terrace and balustrade, could not fail to make.

The mansion itself—palace were the better word—was also of whitest marble. It was the work of a young architect, a Hungarian, who had put into it all his talent, all his enthusiasm, all his hope of the future. The structure had already made his success: he had been engaged,

before it was finished, to draw the plans for the new house of an Austrian prince whom the growth of Vienna had enabled to turn his immense ancestral domain, once far beyond the city's confines, into a private residence park, and to blossom into a splendor unprecedented in the long and eventful history of his race.

The young man had had a free hand in the designing and building of Vörösss's pile. The merchant had at first bothered him with suggestions whose taste was as bad as their costliness was great; he had suggested overelaboration, heaviness and ugliness where stateliness and distinction were his aim. But Jolan had very gently, very tactfully persuaded him to desist, surrendering to him, however, in the matter of interior decoration, whose overlavish effects the architect, however, filled with gratitude towards her for good offices that had meant so much to him, had disguised and tempered and frustrated with infinite resourcefulness.

The building was an oblong square, pilastered and pedimented, an inspirational adaptation

of Greek and Renaissance models, the classic predominating. The carriage drive led in a semicircular sweep to an entrance under the terrace, below the main door, which, flanked by sixteen windows on each side, piled three stories high, was approached by an imposing flight of broad marble steps. An *orangerie* was built out at the back; the stables were not in the grounds, but in the adjoining street.

The citizens of Budapest admired the building as an added ornament to the beautiful capital of which they are so proud, but shook their heads a little over its owner and the use he could possibly make of his gorgeous state apartments. They were more fit for the ceremonial life of some minor German court; in fact, in all Germany could be found no princeling boasting the possession of such a palace, not even though some eighteenth-century ancestor had left him a *petit Versailles* in imitation of the great.

But Vöröss had always got what he wanted, had always worked undeviatingly towards his aim. So now, if this superb palace stood there,

it was only because it must serve a purpose. A title, said some; public life, said others. The majority believed the ambition, whose outward expression the building was, to be Jolan's. And a few, wise with the cynical inventiveness of the world, wondered if, in the course of time, when Vöröss should be gathered to his fathers, this palace of commerce would not be transformed into a temple of art. These, the circle in which the Vöröss couple moved, smiled tolerantly. Scandal there was none, they willingly admitted, but if there were, after all (one never knows)—well, there was a beautiful and constant attachment to justify, nay, to sanction it. Budapest is a gay city, loving the joys of life with intensity, tolerant like all the continent, ready to acknowledge the right of others to judgment under the flexible Higher Moral Law.

On the night of the ball, the night of the day on which the Stranger had come to Sandor Tatray, the day on which the painter and Jolan had tacitly confessed to each other the secret that long had been no secret to either, the night

which was to witness the entrance of Laszlo Vöröss upon his glory, the marble mansion stood white in its snow-covered grounds, silvered by the moon. Its upper stories were dark, the windows of the state apartments heavily draped, emitting no ray of the ocean of light within. The effect was one of flawless beauty, an idea of the architect, perhaps incongruous with the festal occasion, but certainly impressive. Laszlo had wanted to light the place from top to bottom, and to light it from without with electricity thrown upward against the pure lines of its columns. The architect had won him over by pointing out the effect of the contrast within, compromising at the same time upon ample lights, thrown downward, upon the carriage way.

Crowds had gathered at the entrance gate early in the evening for a glimpse of the arriving guests, in all their finery, through the windows of their carriages.

The scene within beggared all that a vivid imagination could have pictured for itself. On emerging from the reception rooms to right

and left of the carriage entrance, where they left their wraps, the guests found themselves at the foot of a monumental marble stairway, at whose head Jolan stood, smiling, welcoming, gently propelling the arrivals with a little twist of the hand to right and left, inviting them to enter and admire. She was proud and happy, and yet—preoccupied.

She wore a dress of palest pink, from which rose her firm white bosom and gleaming shoulders, her stately neck and the distinction of her face more beautiful in repose than in the animated smiles required by the hour. Her chestnut hair was piled high on her forehead, a single gem of great beauty and size scintillating in its masses. She wore gorgeous jewels, whose quality was not marred by quantity. Her eyes shone like twin stars, but ever and anon they clouded over. And ever she kept a watchful eye upon the throng of guests mounting towards her on the stately marble stairway.

It was a happy crowd, come to amuse itself, eager to be amused; a crowd of dark faces and

raven tresses and plump shoulders and dazzling smiles; a Southern crowd, full of abandon, free from all self-consciousness, surrendering to the festive atmosphere the moment it entered upon it, adding to it with all its will, under the influence of the soft strains of the Zigani band beyond.

There were the business friends of Laszlo, and their wives and daughters, their sons and cousins and nieces, youth thoughtlessly happy, couples spying each other from afar and exchanging greetings at a distance. There were representatives of art and letters, Sandor's contribution to the Vöröss circle. There were darker men still, in diplomatic uniforms, secretaries of legation and military attachés of the Balkan principalities, come from Vienna to give lustre to the feast offered them by a man with whom they were in close and constant communication, glancing with pleased surprise at the beautiful young woman who was his wife. With them had come a consul-general or two, of far-away little Central American republics, daintily built little men, with ex-

quisite feet and slender, perfect hands, immaculate in manners as in dress, wearing large decorations, and flashing from their large black eyes looks of undisguised admiration at their hostess. Graceful, untiring dancers these, captivating partners, perfectly at home among these their fellow-dwellers under a Southern sun half way around the world.

The vast marble apartments, with their rich hangings and the brilliant softness of innumerable wax candles, were filling with the gay, soft roar of light conversation, of laughter, exchanged compliments and glad greetings. And still the guests arrived, and still Jolan kept her post, peering anxiously down the vista of the majestic staircase at her feet, her smile growing ever more mechanical, her preoccupation greater.

The Countess von Biederstein-Marleburg, an American with an Austrian husband, arrived, laughed her jolly little laugh, and passed on, her handsome partner and a bevy of officers in her train, as always. They were the only representatives of the higher nobility

whom Vöröss had been able to capture—his star guests. There were many lesser nobles present, of course, since one cannot throw a stone in the dual monarchy without hitting one, but they were already somewhat small game to the man of millions, more eager to know him than he was to know them, indebted to him for innumerable small favors, from commissions for wine or cigarettes to commissions in some small Balkan army; occasionally for loans. Still, they helped to adorn the occasion.

Then came Vilma Tôth, the orphaned heiress, the young girl whom Jolan had taken under her wing on her entrance upon the world.

The two women looked at each other and smiled, and blushed a little, Vilma with all her old frankness, Jolan with a sudden reservation which was instinctive and beyond her power of rapid realization.

"Oh, Jolan," said the girl, admiringly, "how beautiful it is. What a palace! You must be very happy and proud to-night."

"Do you like it? I am so glad." She evaded a direct answer; it was beyond her.

"Has Sandor arrived yet?"

Jolan involuntarily looked down the staircase again.

"Not yet," she said, briefly. She shook with effusion the hand of a new arrival and retained her a moment in conversation. Vilma looked at her in a puzzled way, then passed on, followed by the poor relation who was her chaperon and *dame de compagnie.*

The young architect, one of the first arrivals, claimed her and proudly showed her the apartments. On his arm she progressed quietly from room to room, her slender form gracefully swaying in a movement that was her own, her piquant face, with its aureole of golden blond hair, nodding greetings on all sides.

Vilma Tôth, heiress, young and more than passably good-looking, with the *cachet* that wealth has learned to copy so deceivingly from rank, was the daughter of one of Laszlo Vörösss's occasional partners in enterprises of the greatest magnitude, and had been left, at the age of twelve, the only possessor of her father's large fortune, which during the nine years that had

since elapsed had been more than doubled in Vöröss's capable hands. On her marriage, Jolan had taken an interest in the lonely child in her convent school, with not a single relative to go to for her vacations, and the difference in age between them being so slight the relation had gradually grown into friendship. It was under Jolan's wing that Vilma had made her bow to the society of finance and commerce into which she had been born; it was Jolan who tried to form her character, to soften certain traits of the girl whose loneliness had engendered not melancholy, but self-will; but in vain.

Suitors, Vilma and the fortune that went with her had had many, almost before she left the school-room; friends she had very few, for, following the bent of her mind, she had developed into an independent young woman whose unconventionality of speech and action were ascribed to haughty disdain of others, whereas in a girl less fortunately situated they might have been thought rather unattractive—little eccentricities that would be subdued by direct contact with life. She had threatened

to run a racing stable of her own, had traveled with no chaperon but a maid, had led on a music teacher until the poor boy was distracted, and had played fast and loose with two or three men of title, disregarding all advice, ready even, she had plainly intimated, to resent it. Jolan had grown rather weary of the task she had taken so gladly upon her shoulders and welcomed with genuine relief the sudden passion which the girl developed for Sandor. Him she would marry and none else! So Jolan had undertaken the task to bring them together, combating the painter's lukewarmness with all her power, ascribing it to Fanny's influence, though, of course, she knew the reason of his disinclination well enough.

She had pondered much over the situation, with all the earnestness of a conscientious, virtuous woman. That she and Sandor had been drifting for a long time, ever so little, almost imperceptibly, she was well aware. Nothing would ever come of it, of course, so why not cut the knot heroically, put all this behind them and ensure safety for them both?

This had been her reasoning and upon it she had acted. Sandor, susceptible to her silent influence as ever, had ultimately acquiesced. Only yesterday he had made known to her his resolution. She had felt so content, so safe, relieved of a long, if vague and distant, anxiety. She had hastened to tell Vilma to be ready for the proposal that very evening.

And now?

Vilma continued her tour of the rooms, admired, envied, coveted. In the library they found Laszlo Vöröss, with a little group of men, drinking champagne, smoking cigars and chatting. They all got up, but Vilma begged them to remain seated. Her glance ran over them rapidly, and—Sandor was not among them. She took a cigarette, lighted it elaborately, perched herself on the arm of one of the deep leather chairs and said, casually:

"All your guests must have arrived by now?"

"Mostly all. One or two are still missing. Two I know, for sure."

"You keep close count of your invitations,

Monsieur Vöröss. Method is everything, is it not so?"

She spoke a little absent-mindedly, her eyes upon the marble corridor through which couples flitted to and from the ball-room in a ceaseless stream. She was watching.

"In this case I have kept close count," rejoined Vöröss, with a laugh, "for both are guests worth watching for. One of them is Sandor Tatray, the pride of our artistic world, the other"—here he turned to Count Biederstein-Marleburg as the proper person, on account of his rank, to receive this information direct—"is a distinguished foreigner, I may add an exalted personage, whose name and title I am not at liberty to disclose."

The Count looked politely interested.

"What name does he use?" he asked.

"He calls himself Dr. Nicholas."

"Don't know. Cannot place him under that name. I will take a look at him by-and-by."

Vöröss swelled with pride. His announcement had had the effect he hoped it would have. He saw with delight a few of the men leave

the library to spread the news that some royalty incognito was expected, and quietly took another sip of champagne.

Vilma got up, deposited on an ash tray the cigarette which she had allowed to go out the moment she had lighted it, gave the architect a signal with her fan, and, taking his arm again, began to admire the superb carving of the wainscoting, gradually edging towards the doorway. In the hall she sighed a little, looked at its impressive marble height and width, and said, a little wistfully:

"Will you build me a house by-and-by, not quite so grand as this, but just as beautiful?"

The architect blushed with pleasure.

"Indeed, I will, Mademoiselle, and it shall be the best of which I am capable."

"Thank you. It will be beautiful. Perhaps it will be soon."

She felt strangely subdued this evening, eager to see Sandor and hear his plea, but calm in her knowledge of what would be the end.

"Now, show me the ball-room," she said, rousing herself. "I hear that is the real tri-

umph of the house, to which everything else on this floor only serves as introduction."

"I hope you will not be disappointed."

They strode rapidly on, and entered the ball-room, filled with dancing couples.

Vilma gave a little cry of admiration.

"How beautiful!" she said. "It is like a dance in fairyland, in the Princess's palace."

The room filled in height two stories of the building, its depth and width being all in perfect proportion. At the back, facing the entrance, tall windows opened into the conservatory, the full width of the room, the openings banked with green, with ferns and mosses and flowers in masses, reaching up to the fronded palms in the background. It was semidark in there, under the snow-covered glass roof, but in the ball-room itself a regal crystal chandelier shed from its innumerable branches the pure, steady, soft light of wax candles. It bathed the walls of inlaid marbles with their malachite pilasters, it shimmered in the gilding of the foliated capitals, and gave the radiance

of fairyland to the white dresses, the gleaming shoulders, the stiff white shirt bosoms, and the gold and red and blue and white of the uniforms of the couples moving on the vast expanse of floor.

The music in the gilded balcony high above their heads, there in the entrance, continued its soft, dreamy valse. The vast room was hushed, nothing was heard but the languorous invitation of the strings, and the faint murmur of rhythmically sliding feet. It was a vision of sensuous beauty, appealing to the eye, soothing the ear.

Then the music stopped, and the magic broke. Laughter rose, and loud chatter, circling couples stopped, the men offering them their arms and fanning them as they began to move towards the corridor, or into the conservatory, in search of seats and refreshments. There was a scurrying to the gilded chairs against the walls for articles deposited there—filmy shawls, dainty boas. In the centre of the floor, however, a dozen young couples had stopped, their dark eyes gleaming, their teeth

flashing, children of the soil, these, craving a new delight after the Viennese valse.

"Czardas!" the young men cried, looking up at the famous swarthy leader in the balcony, "Czardas!"

Clapping of hands, huzzahs, followed. The guests came running in from all directions, conversations were dropped without an unnecessary word of explanation, the room became crowded, the foreigners huddling together in a corner in eager expectancy, tingling with the communicated enthusiasm of the national dance.

"Czardas! Czardas!"

The leader rose. They cheered him, loud and long. Then he put his violin under his chin, caressed it with his cheek, whispered to it, closed his eyes, and began to play.

Eyes lighted up, faces grew wistful. The violin sang softly to these children of the city, telling them of the *pusta* which their race had made its home for a millennium. They saw it at dusk, they heard the wind sweeping over its vast distances, the violins supporting the

leader, the zymbalon adding its deeper note. The melancholy of this music held them; born of them, it returned to claim its kinship. Then the measure quickened; a reckless note crept into the music, and the dance was on.

It was a czardas such as rarely is seen nowadays in Budapest—not the dance of the schools, but the true expression of a national character, reckless in its abandon, bewitching in its poetry, enchaining by its passion and fire.

The Vöröss ball was a success, there could be no doubt of that.

Jolan had remained standing at the head of the stairway, welcoming the few late comers. Still she was watching, still she was peering down its length into the hall below.

Sandor had not yet arrived. He must come, she knew, and soon. Why did she thus tarry, what would she say to him, what was her purpose? She did not know, she had no plan. She had been on the point of joining her guests when Vilma had arrived; then, at the sight of her, yesterday her friend, to-day her enemy,

her rival, she had lingered on. She was more determined than ever to bring on this marriage, to place herself and Sandor beyond the reach of danger. She would remain true to her husband, true to honor, true to herself,—her mind was made up, and yet . . .

She sighed. How she regretted the events of that afternoon, and yet how sweet had been that revelation, that moment of tacit confession which had been all but sealed by their kiss!

Her thought reverted to the Stranger, with his polite insolence, and the magic of his eloquence. She hated him, she feared him. He had proved himself her master, he had forced her even to ask him again to her house, after she had told him that he would not be welcome. Well, he had not come. Perhaps, having won his victory, he was content, and would respect her wishes by staying away.

For him, too, she had watched closely, anxiously, during the two hours of her duty at the head of that stairway, welcoming her guests. She had scrutinized each dark head coming up the broad steps until the face came

within the level of her vision. He had not come, of this she was sure, and in her heart she felt thankful to him for that.

But Sandor? She lingered a moment longer, then the opening strains of the czardas struck upon her ears. She must join her guests.

She turned, and gave a low cry of fright.

Dr. Nicholas stood before her.

CHAPTER VII

THE DEVIL IN SOCIETY

JOLAN recovered herself at once. If this strange man had a mysterious habit of slipping into other people's houses, why, after all, it might be only an eccentricity, a sort of "parlor trick" as amusing to him as it was disconcerting to those upon whom the trick was played. He was going out of her life the next afternoon. She was through with him, and must make the best of him during the few crowded hours of the evening.

Dr. Nicholas offered her his arm with all the distinction of his manner.

"Your palace is superb," he said with serious appreciation, "a masterpiece of pure art, worthy of its beautiful mistress."

"Have you been here long?" she could not help asking.

"A little while. Long enough to take a good

look around. Your architect is a master of stately proportions and imposing perspective. He will go far. I must look him up."

They were moving slowly down the long, wide marble corridor towards the ball-room. Jolan suppressed the question that rose to her lips, but Dr. Nicholas answered it none the less.

"I came alone," he said.

The animated, colorful crowd on the dancing floor welcomed her with a cry of welcome and homage. Sets had been formed for a lancers, which was immediately transformed into a *quadrille d'honneur,* space being made in the centre of the room for Jolan and Dr. Nicholas, the Countess Biederstein-Marleburg and Vöröss, the Count and the Burgomaster's wife, the Burgomaster and his sister, the still youthful widow of a general.

The dance started with all due ceremony. Jolan, always stately, went through it with the dignity of a chatelaine, Dr. Nicholas with infinite distinction in which there was not the slightest touch of affectation. The Count made bows as if he were at the Hofburg, treating not

only the ladies, but the quadrille itself with the greatest deference. Vörösss and the Burgomaster worked hard and conscientiously, feeling that the eye of the world was upon them. The Burgomaster's wife remembered that she had a second cousin who had married a *magnat,* and rose to the occasion; the American Countess and the general's widow laughed a great deal and romped. In fact, the *quadrille d'honneur* ended in a general romp, crowned by long *glissades* along the polished floor, the Countess setting the example, countenanced by Dr. Nicholas, more distinguished than ever, cool and immaculate in his perfectly fitting dress clothes, as he slid along, the American's little hand clinging to his arm.

The ball was certainly a great success, and it was tending towards an unforgettable climax.

When the dance was over, introductions were in order. The Countess, all amiability, smiled, and said, "Come to talk to me, Doctor, by-and-by." The Count showed himself a man of the great world, putting enough reserve into his deference to save his face should the

stranger prove, after all, not to be the august personage he was represented to be; the whole company pressed around for introductions, anxious to shine in the reflected glory of this mysterious member of some reigning house. The little diplomats, having consulted together for a brief moment, joined the throng. In brief, Dr. Nicholas was certainly the success which Vöröss had planned him to be.

Gradually the company dispersed for ices, a little rest and a little chat before the next dance should begin; the slow parade through the vast apartments was begun again, and Vöröss carried off his guest of honor to the library for a cigarette. But before he followed his host, Dr. Nicholas found time to say to Jolan: "Won't you introduce me to Mademoiselle Tôth when you have an opportunity? I am anxious to meet the future wife of our young friend."

In the library everybody rose when Dr. Nicholas entered, and remained standing until he had seated himself, with a little wave of the hand giving permission to follow his example. Smoking was not resumed until after he had

lighted his cigarette; then everybody was silent, waiting for him to open the conversation. It was all *en règle,* according to etiquette.

A new difficulty presented itself when those present began to address him. *Monseigneur,* Highness, Serene Highness, Royal Highness, Sir, all possible honorifics were heaped upon him in an avalanche of confusion. Dr. Nicholas grew testy.

"Pardon me," he said at last, somewhat briefly, "my name to-night is Dr. Nicholas. We'll dispense with the rest."

Silence fell upon the group. The unknown, having thus publicly fortified himself behind his incognito, began to move around here and there, addressing this person and that, in the most approved royal fashion. His remarks were quietly disagreeable.

"You should not have left your garrison, lieutenant, without leave of absence," he said to a young soldier who had come some distance, without applying for permission. "Better be more careful next time," he remarked to a merchant who had been nearly caught conveying

arms to the Mad Mullah; "that jockey of yours will get you into trouble," he whispered sternly to a young man whose fondness of racing was exhausting his means.

He knew everybody, it appeared; what is more, he appeared to know everything about everybody's affairs.

"You should not show yourself so openly with Pfiffi Schwarz in the Ringstrasse," he went on to the scion of one of the great Jewish financial houses. "*We* saw you, and Somebody made a remark about it, Mr. Mordecai."

Flattered, yet frightened by this announcement of high interest in his doings, the youth stammered:

"I beg your pardon, Your Roy... Sir... Doctor, my name is Mortimer de Kay."

"Your father's name was Mordecai, and a good old name it is. Mordecai was a gentleman at Court ages before the Mortemarts and the Mortimers and the De Kays ever dreamt of creeping up out of nothingness. Why not be proud of a patronymic 2400 years old?"

He turned away abruptly, graciousness itself, to the discomfited Vöröss, trembling for the fate of his great night.

"Pardon me, my dear Monsieur Vöröss," he said, "but we all have disagreeable duties to perform. Now I am going to stroll around among the ladies. No; stay here with your guests, do not accompany me."

Dr. Nicholas took away with him from the library the constraint he had created. The talk there was resumed gaily, those present merely resolving not to put themselves in the way of the exalted presence again if they could possibly avoid it.

On one of the great sofas in the hall, a festive young Servian diplomat was being bored to death by an intellectual lady of uncertain age. She wore glasses and a self-satisfied face, a pretentious classical dress, and loose, rumpled gloves. She had written several "advanced" books. She felt that her intellect would make a deep impression upon this mysterious great personage; in fact, she had been lying in wait for him there, near the library door.

"Introduce him to me," she said imperiously to the Servian.

"But...but," stammered he, "I cannot do that. He must command me to present you to him."

"He is incognito."

Torn between desire to get away from this bore and his knowledge of the ways of courts, the diplomat hesitated. Dr. Nicholas, seeing that he was in for it, stopped before them.

"Will you please introduce me to Mademoiselle Mutschera, Monsieur Brousnitza?" he asked pleasantly.

"He has a royal memory for names," thought the diplomat, and "He has heard of me," exulted the woman.

"Won't you sit down, Dr. Nicholas?" she said graciously, as the Servian, having bowed with grateful respect to his deliverer, hastened off in search of amusement.

"Thank you, with pleasure."

The authoress felt that she must lead the conversation at once, if she were to make an impression, so she continued:

"We were just discussing Ibsen when you came up."

"Monsieur Brousnitza must have devoted much thought to him."

"No," in all innocence, "he said that he thought his plays dull. No intellect at all, you know. An insipid young man. He told me that he would rather see the *Merry Widow*."

"Thou shalt not steal. Translated from the German," mused Dr. Nicholas aloud.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I am sure I beg yours. Something I saw in New York the other day came to my mind."

"New York? Oh yes, Ibsen is very popular there. Of course, over there the women are so much more advanced than here, they feel the significance of his plays as only a few delicate minds can do here."

Mademoiselle Mutschera looked self-conscious. Dr. Nicholas gave her a very disagreeable look out of the corner of his eye. She did not see it so she continued,

"Ibsen understands women."

"Does he? Perhaps. If he does, he is the

only man that ever did. But that is not the question. Do women understand him?"

"Oh, indeed, they do . . . the fine minds among them, of course. The common mass never understands anything."

"May I tell you my frank opinion? Ibsen did not understand women. If he had understood them, he would not have had to end so many of his plays violently, with death. It is very inartistic to get one's characters into a muddle, and then kill them off to get out of it. It is dodging the real issue to which the play has led up."

"Oh, but . . . "

"Please hear me out. Women do not understand Ibsen, they don't understand themselves. Few men understand themselves, either, for that matter, but they, at least, have no psychological delusions on the subject. Unfortunately, whenever an author puts an absolutely unintelligible woman into a book or a play, the women, being unintelligible to themselves, cry out in chorus, 'How well he knows us!' It is a sort of negative knowledge, per-

haps, a knowledge of the existence of an impenetrable fog."

"But you will admit that Ibsen has taught women to be themselves?"

"He has taught them to be imitation Ibsen heroines,—poor imitations, mostly, at that. So they are vaguely discontented with everything, aggressively disagreeable to their bewildered husbands, and they expect other women's husbands to climb steeples and fall off backward for their sakes. When women try to make direct applications of symbolism, when they mistake inverted idealism for realism, strange things happen."

The authoress suddenly felt towards Dr. Nicholas as the Servian diplomat had felt towards her a few moments ago. What a disagreeable man! And she had hoped to impress him with the power of her intellect! Ah! Her dearest friend, her rival, Mademoiselle Temesvar, the historian, was coming down the corridor, alone and pensive. Mademoiselle Temesvar was pretty and well-groomed. The authoress hailed her.

"Mishka," she said, getting up, "let me present Dr. Nicholas to you."

She bowed with offended dignity, and stalked off, leaving the two standing face to face.

"Let us sit down," said Mishka. What a charming name, the Doctor thought, and what a pretty face, and what a pity that he was going to snub her.

"Dr. Nicholas," began the fair historian, "I hear that you have travelled much, and that you are a great linguist. I heard you talk faultless Hungarian a while ago, then French, then German, then English to the Countess. . . . I suppose it was English?"

"It was American. The Americans know no language but their own, not even English."

"I thought so. Well, Dr. Nicholas, are you a student, or merely a linguist?"

"I have read much in all the languages I know. That is what you mean, I suppose?"

"Yes. Are you interested in history?"

"Very much. I have followed the histories of Nero and Caligula, of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, of Ivan the Terrible, Charles II.,

Louis XV., Katharine . . . I cannot name them all . . . with deepest interest."

"Well, that is not quite what I mean. Have you studied the history of the literatures of the world?"

"To some extent, yes."

"Now we have reached the point. You see, Dr. Nicholas, I am engaged in writing a history of the Devil in Literature."

"You have come to headquarters, so to speak, Mademoiselle Mishka—pardon me if I use your first name, it is so attractive. Yes, I can say that I am authority on Devil literature."

"Oh, how delightful. Will you let me catechize you?"

Dr. Nicholas made a hasty movement of the hand.

"Please do not use that word," he exclaimed. "It has an unpleasant connotation for me. But I will let you cross-examine me. Or, perhaps, you will let me tell you what I know."

"By all means. I shall be very much obliged to you."

"Well, then, Mademoiselle Mishka, you will

have to begin all over again. The Devil in art, the Devil in literature, it is misunderstanding and misrepresentation from beginning to end. I don't mind the legends of the saints and their supposed victories,—that was not literature, but propaganda: the end justifies the means, and one could fight them. But when it comes to secular literature, to works of the human imagination, well, we see a sorry mess. Dante, Marlowe, Milton, Bunyan, Goethe, Byron—believe me, they didn't know what they were talking about. I don't speak of the medieval stage, on which the Devil always got the worst of it, in coarsest ribaldry; nobody reads those things nowadays. But those others, how they have misrepresented . . . him.

"Then there is that story of the apple. One would think that that is the only thing the Devil ever did for woman. Why, he is handing her apples every day—in jewelry shops and dry goods emporiums, in garages and expensive restaurants, and yachts,—and the man takes his bite, which is pleasant, but has an aftertaste of a bill that is greater than his resources.

"Has the Devil not tricked man into working for woman by the sweat of his brow? And has he not taught him to work ever more willingly and hard? Has he not given the poor, simple creature his compensations—alcohol, tobacco, cards, the joy of brawling and fighting, over women by preference, but over everything else, if a pretext is needed? Has he not invented the games of high finance, of overreaching the other man, of diplomacy and conquest?

"Why, the Devil is the benefactor of mankind. Has not every forward step of the race been ascribed to him? Is not vaccination acknowledged to be his work to this day in England? Has he not made woman what she is, after the dark age of her enslavement?"

"You say strange things, Dr. Nicholas."

"Oh, I get indignant whenever I think of it. In Goethe the Devil changes himself into a poodle. Why, I ask you, why? In Gounod's *Faust* he gives himself away by causing wine to pour out of a signboard. Is that common sense? In Boïto's opera he gyrates like an Irish

policeman throwing the hammer at an athletic festival, and in Berlioz's he goes around looking as if he had just buried a dictatorial mother-in-law and knew that his wife was watching the expression of his face. It is sad.

"Then that fellow Ben Jonson, with his 'The Devil Is an Ass' . . . oh, I lose all patience. It is rank ingratitude."

Dr. Nicholas smiled to himself.

"Let yours be the task of rehabilitating the Devil, Mademoiselle. Historians are doing this for so many of his subjects. Nero has been proved to have been quite a respectable personage, and now Lucrezia Borgia is out on bail."

"Out on bail!"

"Yes. She had been perfectly happy where she was for nearly four hundred years, when along came a German who proved that she had been quite a domestic, respectable body. A firm of smart, pushing criminal lawyers applied for a new trial on the ground of this new evidence, and there you are. Lucrezia was very angry about it, I can tell you."

"How strangely you talk," repeated the fair Mishka, who was beginning to be frightened.

"I give you new ideas for your book? Mankind is always afraid of new ideas, they are the Devil's—at first. When they have become familiar, others claim the credit. You have hit upon one of my hobbies, and I am galloping it along the road."

"There is a contemporary author who has put the Devil into a book. What do you think of him?"

"You mean George Bernard Shaw, of course. Well, you know, Mr. Shaw does not love me—Dr. Nicholas, you understand?"

"Then you know him personally?"

"Oh yes. I have met him several times."

"But why does he not like you?"

"I caught him studying Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on the sly."

"Oh! But what about his Devil?"

"Well, he talks like an advanced thinker at a Sunrise Club dinner."

"Again I do not understand, but what you have said to me is very interesting. You have

given me new thoughts—and I am not afraid of them."

"The only Devil in literature who approaches the truth," proffered Doctor Nicholas, determined to put an end to the conversation, "is St. Anthony's."

"But," he continued slowly, "St. Anthony did not tell the story right. There were no witnesses, you will remember, and . . . well, in his account he turned defeat into a victory . . ."

"Sir!" said the historian, rising precipitately, and haughtily stalking away.

"Good work, good work," said Dr. Nicholas to himself, rubbing his hands. "I hope I shall be left alone now to look after my own little affairs . . . Oh no, here is the Countess.

"May I have the honor of conducting you to the supper room?" he asked gallantly, the lady's escort dropping her arm with a bow, and respectfully withdrawing from the exalted presence.

"No, thank you," laughed the American. "I have just come from there. You know, I skated all morning, and this afternoon I went tobog-

ganing, and now I am dancing. . . . It gives one an appetite."

"Ah, yes; youth, good health, high spirits, comfort. . . . Why should you not be happy, and—have a good appetite. Will you talk to me a little? Let us sit out this dance."

"I am engaged for it. But, of course, since you command. . . . There is my partner, looking at me in much perplexity."

She gaily waved a dismissal with her fan, and sat down.

"Have you ever been in America, Dr. Nicholas?" she began.

"Oh, yes; I have paid the country several visits."

"And do you like it?"

"Well, no. I go there as little as possible. My interests there are large enough, but they are of a simple nature, they run themselves, so to speak."

"But why do you not like America?"

"Well, it lacks gaiety. The people are not to my liking. They are too simple, psychologically speaking."

"Pardon me, but I do not understand."

"Let me try to make myself clear. If I said just now that the Americans are simple psychologically, I must explain a little. They are daring criminals, but timid sinners."

"And for that reason you do not like the people?"

"Well, you see, it makes life there flat. The crimes are all financial, commercial, and political—most uninteresting. They go on automatically, unconsciously almost. But there are no pretty frothy sins that give life color and surface joy, and depth below it, in this part of the world."

"I fail to see your reasoning."

"Over there they do too much, and feel too little. The man's morality is woman's morality —sexual morality. On that point they are incorruptible, but ethically they are confused. What the rest of the world considers man's province—civic morality, I might call it,—they consider of minor importance."

"But the Devil is at work there?"

"Oh, yes, you may be sure that he neglects

no part of this world. Only, he need not pay much attention to his affairs in your country. As I have said, they go on automatically, and they grow as they go on. Oh, yes, the Devil's American ledger must be well filled."

"But only with the names of financiers, and politicians, and the like?"

"Only with those. I often wonder how he will place them when they get there. They can hardly interest Cæsar, or Napoleon, or Frederick, or Voltaire, or Robespierre."

The Countess looked wearied. This kind of talk—it was very clever, no doubt—did not interest her. Moreover, she suspected that it was rather irreverent, if not positively blasphemous. Also, she was a loyal daughter of the Republic, notwithstanding her title.

"But you like our social life?" she asked, changing the current of the conversation a little.

"It is very brilliant, but it lacks something. It is all women, and very few men, and the very few men are not your best, your ablest, your master minds. They are too busy."

"Is there anything in America that has Your Highness's august approval?"

"I admire your women, your clubs are models for the world to copy, you have brought the material comforts of life to a state of perfection unapproachable elsewhere, but you try to live by the intellect alone; you neglect your emotional selves, and thereby lose the best part of life."

"Thank you for my country. Here comes the architect of this palace. I suggested all the modern improvements, you know—electric light and ranges, porcelain-lined bath tubs, nickel-plated showers and needle baths, hot water heat, elevators,—all the material comforts you admire so much." To herself she added, "And you are not the first rude Royal Highness I have met."

"Is not that Mademoiselle Tôth with the architect?" asked Dr. Nicholas.

"Yes, that is the unconventional heiress. She and I are great cronies. We understand each other. She should live in New York."

"Will you present us?"

"With pleasure. I obey a command. But," she added, flashing upon him her brilliant smile, which disarmed resentment, "you must promise not to be rude to her. It would distress her. We Americans know deep down in our hearts, even while we play the game and are anxious to get into it, that all this business of titles and insurmountable social barriers is tottering to its end. We don't care, so long as it lasts our time. But to her you are very real, to be taken with portentous seriousness. With all her emancipation, she is only a European girl of the middle classes, after all."

"I promise that I will be as charming to her as I know how. Like all the world, I am the servant of an American woman."

"Now you are nice, quite suddenly."

Vilma approached slowly, listless, preoccupied. Sandor had not yet arrived, and her interest in the brilliancy of the evening had died out.

"Vilma," said the Countess, "Dr. Nicholas desires very much to know you. Monsieur Erdöd, come and show me the picture gallery. I haven't seen it since it was finished."

She dropped a curtsey, with a touch of mockery in its depth, took the delighted architect's arm, and moved rapidly away, her laughter floating up. She brought gaiety with her wherever she went.

"Mademoiselle Tôth," said Dr. Nicholas, "I know that you have kept this quadrille open—for me, do let me believe it. Will you do me the pleasure of sitting it out with me?"

"You do not wish to dance?"

"I prefer a duet—with you—to a quadrille."

He offered her his arm, and piloted her skilfully along the walls of the ball-room, on the outskirts of the bowing and moving sets, to the entrance of the conservatory. On the broad landing at the top of its short flight of marble steps they stopped a moment. Then Dr. Nicholas said:

"Let us sit down over there. We can watch this entrance there, and chat comfortably."

Vilma settled herself in one of the little chairs, placed her fan upon the table beside her, and looked across it at her companion.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEVIL'S PAWNS

"TELL me," began Vilma, with admiration, "why you have been so disagreeable to people to-night? They are all talking about it. You see, I am unconventional. I tell you right out. And yet you can be very pleasant, as you are now."

"And you are curious?"

"Why, yes. You must have done this deliberately."

"I have. You see, I have set myself the task of being alone this evening, because I have something to accomplish. Now, if I made myself agreeable, I'd be surrounded. If I said nothing, all the old fogies—the men who don't dance and can't talk—would invite me to sit with them in silence and smoke more than is good for them, or for me. So what remained but to make myself as disagreeable as possible?

I have isolated myself—a splendid isolation since I share it with you."

"Then I shall not interfere with your purpose?"

"Quite the contrary. You are to play a part in its accomplishment."

"You are an old friend of Sandor?"

"A very old friend. I am fond of him, and I expect great things from him. In fact, I am trying to set him in the right path, faced in the right direction. I even flatter myself that I have made a good beginning."

"Has it something to do with—with his marriage?"

"Somewhat."

"Then I know your purpose. You are in the secret, too."

"Perhaps I am, and yet my secret may not be yours."

"Let us get this straight. They call me the impudent Vilma, you know. I say what I think, whenever and wherever I think of it."

"And nobody believes you?"

"No, they believe that it is all pose."

"Of course, a woman who says what she thinks, even when she is not angry. It must be bewildering."

"I mean to be bewildering."

"But it is not fair. One expects a woman to tell little lies occasionally. That is the charm of her uncertainty; it keeps one guessing. To tell the truth always is just as futile as to lie always. In neither case will you achieve your purpose. Either acquire a reputation for truthfulness, and then fib whenever it suits your convenience, or establish a reputation for mendacity, and then upset them by telling the truth."

"You are leading away from the subject of our conversation."

"Is not that a woman's way of arriving at what she wishes to say?"

"You think you know my secret, but you do not. I know yours."

"What is this secret of mine?"

"When I say yours, I don't mean you alone. I mean you and Jolan and Sandor. You see, I

am the girl to whom he is to propose to-night. Jolan has managed it, and you are trying to help it along now."

"But . . .

"This is my secret, and it puts an end to yours. I know everything—*everything,* you understand? I know what is going on."

"I understand."

"So," continued Vilma with rising excitement, "I want you to know that I am nobody's dupe. If I accept him, it is with my eyes wide open. I know what has been going on for several years."

"But why do you say all this to me?"

"Am I not telling you? Are you not one of the conspirators, do you not believe that I am blind? Oh, I'll marry him, indeed I will, and I shall know what I have to do after that."

"I don't believe it."

"Whether you believe it or not, I will marry him—knowing all."

"My dear young lady," said Dr. Nicholas soothingly, "you have honored me with your confidence. Now let me say a word: Nothing

will come of all this planning and plotting. You'll never marry Sandor."

"Why do you speak so confidently?"

"Because, I confess it, I know the true inwardness of this matchmaking game, but I doubt if you do, though you say so, because, if you did, you would not wish to marry him."

Vilma began to show increasing signs of nervous tension. She plucked at the tips of her gloves, tapped her little feet on the sanded floor, and winked her eyes. Dr. Nicholas reached into the breast pocket of his coat, produced the daintiest of jewelled gold vanity cases, and opened it on his knee.

"If I knew, I would not wish to marry him?" repeated the girl. "Why, that's just my secret."

"What is the use of beating around the bush?" she continued, speaking rapidly. "I know very well that he is in love with another woman—I will not name her,—and that she has made this match for him, to ensure her own safety, perhaps to shield herself behind our friendship."

The tears were trickling down her cheeks,

try as she might to control them. Dr. Nicholas reached into the vanity case, and produced a tiny handkerchief. Handing it to her, he said:

"Permit me to give you this first aid to the injured. I always carry this case with me when I go into the society of ladies. There is everything needful."

"How thoughtful of you. I suppose that it is quite a usual thing for you to make women weep."

"It is my aim always to comfort and console them."

Vilma dabbed nervously at her eyes, and tried to get control of her shaking voice.

"When we are on my honeymoon," she continued, *staccato,* "I shall know that he's thinking of her while he is making love to me. . . . I don't care. . . . I know what I am doing. . . , Only, I don't want you others to flatter yourself that you have hoodwinked me, that you've tricked me. . . . I have my own plan, and I shall succeed. She hasn't counted on that."

"I did not suppose that the discussion of this

subject would excite you so much," said Dr. Nicholas, handing her a tiny powder puff and a small mirror, which she took mechanically.

"No one shall laugh at me," continued Vilma, making vicious dabs at her nose with the puff, and peering into the glass. "Tell her that I know, and that I will make him love me. Now you know *my* secret: I love him with all my heart, with all my soul!"

Vilma returned the powder puff, smoothed the powder on her nose by the aid of the handkerchief and the little mirror, handed both to Dr. Nicholas, who replaced them in the case, and the case in his pocket, and said with perfect self-possession,

"So. Now you know *my* secret. What do you think of it?"

"This is the emancipated, the ultra-modern Vilma?" asked Dr. Nicholas with astonishment.

"No, this is the real Vilma," she returned promptly. "I chose you to talk to, instead of—her. This morning I was a young girl, to-night I am an old woman. . . . I have thought so much. Dr. Nicholas, won't you be my friend?

I have been defeated; I hope to win my victory after, not before marriage."

"May I advise you?"

"Please do."

"Do not postpone your campaign until afterward. You must take up the fight openly, now, aggressively. And you must look beautiful."

"I'll do my best."

"You must fight that other woman, not with her weapons, but with your own. You have tried to imitate the greater freedom of the married woman . . . you have been emancipated, free, unconventional. It won't do. There is a barrier which you dare not pass, and it is on the further side of it that the married woman's power begins. She knows that power, she has used it before upon her husband, the charm of her personality. . . . I am treading on delicate ground."

"Proceed."

"You are sensible, I see. For a young girl to adopt the married woman's tactics spells defeat —defeat in success, defeat in failure. I am a hardened man of the world, but I must say

that the emancipated girl never has that potency of influence over me that the simplicity of innocence exerts. It attracts me . . . it holds me, it rouses in me an irresistible desire to win it. Ah, Mademoiselle . . . "

"No nonsense, please. No compliments; I am familiar with all this conservatory, sit-out-dances palaver."

Dr. Nicholas sorrowfully shook his head.

"The unconventional Vilma again," he said. "Pray let me proceed. I was just getting to the point of my oration. The young girl, I said, can never successfully compete with the married woman, with that woman's own weapons. What remains, then? A power far greater which she has lost, which she can no more simulate than the girl can hers—the power of maidenly innocence."

"You think so?" said Vilma, doubtingly. She had lived with her eyes wide open.

"I know it, I am convinced of it. Believe me, all men are alike in this. Your rival is freed from certain considerations that are binding upon you. Your plan is to wait until your mar-

riage has placed you upon an equality with her before attempting to win his love?"

"Yes, that was my plan."

"Well, fight out the battle beforehand. Drop the old Vilma, put on the new. Do not be forward and self-possessed, do not parade your knowledge of the world. Cast down your eyes, be timid. Approach with troubled misgiving this lord of creation, tremble as you look up into his eyes. Let him feel that you consider him your superior in wisdom, in experience, in strength, pretend to hide but imperfectly your admiration of his comeliness and his talent. Sit at his feet and worship, then get up and run a little distance away from the fence, lure him away from it, for that other woman stands on the other side singing her less idyllic siren song. Retreat, and he will follow until he is in your net."

"I do not like it," said Vilma, disdainfully.

"You wish to win him, do you not?"

"Yes, oh yes; I love him so much!"

"Then follow my advice. All's fair in love and war."

"And it will work? It seems to me so transparent."

"Man's love is easiest won through his vanity. When his vanity is appealed to, he becomes credulous as a child. Why," added Dr. Nicholas, growing enthusiastic, "with this recipe of mine, a hideous old hag could have coaxed Don Juan into a corner from which he could not have escaped, not even with the aid of Leporello and his sword."

At this moment, Sandor appeared in the doorway of the conservatory, and looked down upon them.

"Shall I do it?" whispered Vilma.

"It is your only chance," said Dr. Nicholas, getting up as Sandor slowly descended the steps and approached their table. "Ah, Sandor," he continued, "I will surrender my place to you, and join the merry throng again."

"Vilma, I have been looking for you everywhere," said the painter, taking the seat Dr. Nicholas had just vacated.

"I have been searching everywhere," he continued, looking curiously at Vilma, who sat on

the edge of her chair, her hands in her lap, her eyes demurely cast down.

"Yes," she murmured in a small, shy voice.

"Why did you come here?"

"I wanted to be alone. There were so many people in there it confused me."

"But you have been to many balls, and you were always in the midst of the romping and the fun."

"But . . . but, you were always with me to look after me." She ventured one startled, fawn-like look at him, then cast down her eyes again. "It is different, somehow, when one is with a man whom one trusts, and who knows what is the right thing to do."

She peered at him out of the corner of her downcast eyes. Had she gone too far, she wondered, was she laying it on a little too heavily? But no, Sandor was staring at her with admiring eyes, a gratified smile upon his lips. So she continued, in the same modest voice:

"Who is this Dr. Nicholas? He said that he was an old friend of yours. He was very kind to me."

"He is a chance acquaintance who has forced himself upon me. A queer chap—I consider him a neurasthenic philosopher. He rendered me an important service long ago, so I straightway forgot him. He will probably render me another one, and then I shall positively loathe him."

Vilma gave a silvery little laugh. "How clever you are," she gurgled, "and so cynical, and you mean nothing by it."

"You are changed somehow, Vilma," said the enchanted painter, tenderly. "So different from your other self, the hard, self-possessed self you show to the world."

"How I loathe it, Sandor," confided the ingenuous lady, entering heartily into this new game. "You know, ever since I was a little child I have been timid. It is a torture to me to be out among strangers, to meet them, to talk to them. And so I adopted my impudent pose in self-defence. I schooled myself to be original, independent, emancipated, but oh, often when I was boldest my heart was in my mouth. It is such a relief to lay aside the mask with

you. I do not need to be on the defensive against you any longer. . . . You are so magnanimous, so strong."

"And you have hidden your real self from me all this time," cried the enchanted painter. "How little I have known you, and how much better I like you thus. How sweet you look, how innocent."

He softly placed his hand over her fingers, resting quietly in her lap. Vilma snatched them away with maidenly confusion, but not before Jolan had seen the tender little episode as she entered the conservatory on Dr. Nicholas's arm. Involuntarily her hand gave a little tug, and she stopped short. The Doctor coughed discreetly.

"Behold," he said, smoothly, "the realization of your dearest wish."

"My dearest wish. Do not let us disturb them."

"They appear to be too much interested in the color of each other's eyes to notice us," Dr. Nicholas rejoined. "Now for a four-cornered game of murderous jealousy," he said to him-

self—"Jolan against Vilma, Sandor against me, and the victory is mine."

"Let us sit down a little while," he continued, half-aloud, pointing to two chairs on the other side of the conservatory, under a far-spreading palm. "It won't be indiscreet. We both know their secret, and rejoice over the result of your little plan."

They softly descended the steps, and sat down. Jolan would have gone away, but something within her forced her to witness this scene, to watch the sudden intimacy of these two. She felt profoundly wretched. Dr. Nicholas bent forward and began to whisper, giving to their attitude an air of mysterious intimacy.

"Jolan is over there," said Vilma in a low tone.

"I have already paid my respects to her. Do not let us take any notice. She will go away again in a little while."

"She appears to be deeply interested in her escort," continued Vilma. "They have their heads close together, and are whispering."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, it is that friend of yours, Dr. Nicholas."

Sandor started, but restrained himself, and continued to pay his court, mechanically, absent-mindedly. Vilma observed the change in his demeanor, and her heart grew bitter. Still, she played her new part with increased energy. It would never do to give up so soon.

"How becoming that blush is to you, Vilma."

"You thought that I had forgotten how to blush," she whispered sadly. "Oh, what a wrong impression you must have of me."

"I never misjudged you," protested the painter, but faintly. He took up her fan, and began to toy with it, his elbows on his knees. The attitude brought his head nearer to the girl. He knew this, and assumed it on purpose. Jolan must see it. He was straining his ears to hear what these other two were saying.

"It seems that they have found each other at last" whispered Jolan.

"Perhaps so. Does it affect you disagreeably?" rejoined Dr. Nicholas, looking into her troubled eyes.

"Not in the least. On the contrary, I am glad to see the success of my efforts."

"Shall we move farther away? He may wish to speak now. . . . We may hinder him."

"Let us stay a little longer. It is quiet here, and cool, and I am very tired."

"They are speaking about us," whispered Vilma, in her corner.

"Let them talk. What are they to us . . . to-night?"

"Why do you constantly try to look at them, then?"

"Do I? I was not aware of it."

Jolan grew fidgetty. Jealousy bade her stay, her pride commanded her to go. But—Sandor would propose if she went.

"So you came after all," she said playfully to Dr. Nicholas. "I had hoped that you would be prevented. I am always saying rude things to you, but you provoke them."

"I came for a purpose. This afternoon I undertook to accomplish something. My pride was involved, and now my feelings are."

"What is this purpose? I have felt all along that your coming was not an idle accident."

"I hardly dare to tell you."

Jolan became interested. This mysterious man was a puzzle to her.

"You will not be angry? Well, then, I told someone that I would turn your head to-night."

She laughed, scornfully yet uneasily.

"To whom did you make this amazing statement?"

"To Sandor."

"To Sandor? And what did he say? Did he allow you to say it all?"

"He acted in a way that astonished me. But I cannot explain just now. You might be offended, angrier with him even than you must be with me."

"I am not offended with you, only amazed, and—heartily disgusted. You have gone too far. Men speak lightly of women, I know, but to confess it to them afterward. . . . I am sure that Sandor said or did nothing to offend me. He knew what was the proper thing to say and do."

Here Sandor bent forward, and again touched Vilma's hand.

"Why are you constantly looking at them?" asked Dr. Nicholas.

"Am I? I was not aware of it. He certainly is taken with her."

"Your eyes are sombre like brooding volcanoes," said Dr. Nicholas, with low intensity, "there is in them a power of consuming fury, a promise of all-compelling love. Should the right man kiss your eyelids, you might awake to the glory of passion; should a woman thwart you, they might flash destruction. But alas, you will never be awakened by that kiss. And the promise will die out in your eyes. You will be a respected, honored, middle-aged wife who has never known love—the ecstasy of giving and taking all that is best in life."

"You presume upon your position as my guest, perhaps upon your rank. You must not talk to me like that."

"I am the spirit that denies the empty conventionalities which fetter the souls that would

soar aloft. I destroy them, I encourage the timid to be daring, the shackled to wrench themselves free, the slaves of fate to make themselves its masters."

"Your oratory is strange, it sounds ominous. Again I ask you, Who are you?"

"I must preserve my incognito. . . . There, Sandor has touched her hand again. Her hour is coming, yours is passing—and his."

"How sweet you are to-night," Sandor was whispering; "so gentle and demure. You, always so independent, make me feel as if you clung to me."

"I do, Sandor. I have always relied upon your strength, your cleverness—in secret. Oh, what have I said? So bold, so forward a thing!"

"It does not sound forward from your lips, Vilma. Oh, if I had only suspected this real self of yours sooner—if only . . ."

The painter was succeeding better again in his courtship. His attention, distracted for a while by the unseen doings of the two behind his back, by jealous anxiety and apprehension,

had returned to Vilma, under the soothing touch of her adroit demureness.

"You never sought me out, Sandor. It was I who always made you my partner. I was afraid that a young girl would bore you. I tried to be bold, impudent, amusing, and now you tell me that you disliked it. A young girl knows so little of the world. She must grope her way."

Sandor was touched. He sat up, squared his shoulders, and opened his mouth to ask the question that would decide his fate. . . . Dr. Nicholas's laugh reached him, low but triumphant. "Then you consent?" he heard him say. "This is more than good of you, it is generous."

The words rang in Sandor's ears. Their meaning he could not know, but he jumped at a conclusion. Rage overmastered him, and the impulse to snatch Jolan from him, to take her away, beyond his reach. He stumbled in the speech he had begun, whose intent Vilma had fully grasped, the moment its opening word was spoken, stammered, and, in the torture of his suspicion, repeated Dr. Nicholas's words. . .

"She consents!"

Vilma rose, pale to the lips, trembling like a leaf.

"Take me into the ball-room," she commanded proudly. "I have promised the next dance."

"But . . . but," stumbled the painter, his brain still in a whirl, only dimly realizing what he had done, "but . . . but . . . Won't you stay a little longer? I wish to speak to you most earnestly."

"You desire to listen most earnestly." Vilma's self-possession gave way. "I will not distract your eaves - dropping attention any longer."

She swept past him towards the foot of the stairs, Sandor following her in a daze. Jolan, too, had risen, and met the couple before they had mounted the first step. The three stood together, agitated. Dr. Nicholas remained a little in the background, his left elbow supported by his right hand, his left hand caressing his long chin, his face alert. His eyes shone with repressed excitement.

Jolan glared at Vilma, who stared back cold-

ly, disdainfully. An outbreak was imminent, the irreparable outburst of two jealous women, throwing to the winds all prudence, all the safeguards of breeding and tradition, all the disguises and compromises and pretenses that make possible the dwelling together in safety of men and women. Two children of nature they had become, beneath their modern finery; millenniums of slow progress upward had been torn from them by the fury of a primeval instinct stronger nearly always in such crises than is the other guiding influence of life, the instinct of self-preservation.

"I saw them thus in their caves, thousands of years ago; I shall see them thus thousands of years hence," mused Dr. Nicholas. "They never will get away from savagery so long as man is man and woman is woman."

He was impartial now. His end was gained. So he stood by, an idle spectator.

Jolan's eyes were the first to fall. Centuries of training along certain lines of thought, of acceptance of certain conventions, did tell, after all. She had no right to this man in the eyes of

the world. Yet it was not surrender, merely a deferring of the struggle for the sake of appearances.

"Are you not dancing?" she asked sweetly.

"To tell the truth, I hate dancing," replied Vilma with superb self-possession. "But to-night I mean to dance until dawn, to enjoy myself every moment that is left, if for no other reason than that there are people who hate to see me happy."

Then, turning to Sandor with an imperious turn of the body, she said:

"Take me to the ball-room, Sandor." Consulting her card, she added, "this dance is yours. I do not wish to miss that mazurka."

Slowly, with dignity, she mounted the marble stairs, one by one, unfaltering, though her knees trembled and her nerves threatened to give way. Not once did she look back, her little head held high on the slender column of her neck, her bare shoulders carried proudly, every inch of her graceful figure betokening her knowledge that for this brief moment the victory was hers.

At the head of the stairs she took Sandor's arm, and entered the ball-room. They saw her stoop to pick up her train, and whirl away in his arms, with a word and a smile upon her lips.

CHAPTER IX

THE DEVIL'S MANTLE

THE moment Vilma had been swallowed up by the gracefully whirling mass of white under the tranquil shimmer of the sea of light, Jolan turned to Dr. Nicholas.

"Did you hear?" she asked excitedly. "She must feel pretty sure of her position when she speaks to me in that way."

And she added, the new thought breaking the last bonds of her reserve:

"Sandor has fallen in love with her."

"Can that be possible?" said Dr. Nicholas. "I cannot believe it after what happened this afternoon. No, it is impossible."

"What happened?"

The question was imploring, and commanding at the same time.

"A little while ago I was afraid to tell you.

I hesitate now more than ever. You spoke very severely to me. I admit that I deserved it. No, it is better not to tell you."

"But I have a right to know. This . . . this, I am in a confusion, an uncertainty that is killing me."

"Well, then. You will understand that I have the best motives, that I only wish to be of service, to straighten out this tangle into which I have been drawn by accident?"

"Yes, yes," impatiently.

"When I told him this afternon that . . ."

"That you intended to make love to me?"

"That I intended to make love to you, he . . . tried to kill me."

"He tried to kill you!"

Jolan said this joyously. Her face became transfigured, her eyes shone.

"Sandor tried to kill you!"

She repeated the words with passionate fondness and an exultation of pride. Dr. Nicholas grinned. He saw that he had suddenly risen in this woman's estimation because he had forced the man she loved to this barbaric confession of

his passion. He enjoyed the humor of the situation, and tried to prolong it.

"He took my own revolver away from me," he continued, and "tried to shoot me with it."

Softly, ecstatically, staring far away at some vision of bliss, Jolan repeated:

"He tried to kill him, for my sake!"

"With my own revolver, with six barrels, all loaded," prompted Dr. Nicholas.

"With his own revolver, with six barrels, all loaded," she repeated with mechanical docility. Then, in an outburst of ecstatic admiration, she cried:

"How noble of him!"

Dr. Nicholas could not help it. He turned aside, and winked solemnly, slowly, at an oleander bush.

Jolan's mind suddenly reverted from this dramatic revelation of what happened that afternoon to what she had seen that evening but a moment ago.

"This afternoon he wanted to kill him," she wailed, "for my sake. And just now he did not care when I sat here whispering to him. Do

what I would, he paid no attention. Oh, he has fallen in love with her, suddenly, insanely!"

"There you are," said Dr. Nicholas, in a grieved tone of voice. "Suppose he had killed me, what a mess we all should be in at this moment! Is it ever worth while to kill a man for the sake of a woman?"

Jolan suddenly recovered her senses, and instinctively put on again the social mask that she had dropped.

"He tried to kill you because he respects me. You, no doubt, said things . . . Well, I am grateful to him, my knight!"

She made a dismissing gesture of the hand, and added, but without conviction:

"I hope that he will be happy with her. He certainly loves her very much."

"Does he?"

"Does he not?" She grasped at the doubt with pitiful eagerness.

"It is interesting to see how exercised you are because your favorite plan appears to be successful. You affirm and deny in the same breath.'

"You unsettle my mind with your insinuating doubts. Don't you believe that I have succeeded?"

"I do not know, Madame Vöröss, because I am not aware of what success you really desire. Do you know yourself? Do you really wish him to love her?"

"What is this you mean?"

"I am a disinterested spectator, trying to help things along. By way of reward I receive nothing but abuse and suspicion of my motives. Ah, yes, the way of the peacemaker!"

"What did you mean just then? You do not believe that Sandor has fallen in love with Vilma?"

Dr. Nicholas took a resolution. Looking straight at Jolan, he said in that clear, incisive way of his:

"Let us clear the atmosphere—let us put all the cards on the table, a proceeding which a woman always suspects. This afternoon he tried to kill me in a transport of fury because I had said that I intended to make love to you."

"Yes."

"You say it is respect. The shots that are fired out of respect are fired from the cannon of a visiting fleet and a welcoming fort, not from a six-shooter wrested from the hand of a man unprepared for the onslaught. I say it is love!"

"But then, did we not see him just now?"

"We did see him just now, but you did not see him this afternoon. I did. I have reason to remember. It was love, I tell you! passionate love! Yet you say that he has suddenly changed, because he was philandering a little with an attractive girl in a conservatory, between two dances. Why, in such surroundings that is the duty of even the most devout of lovers towards the woman with whom he happens to be for the moment.

"Of course," he continued persuasively, "your whole interest in the matter lies in the success of the match that you have planned."

"That is all," lied Jolan steadfastly.

"And you are afraid for the girl's future. You would not have her marry him if he did

not love her as a husband should love his wife. Oh, I understand."

"Yes, you understand now, perfectly."

"And suddenly a doubt has entered your mind. You have heard what I have told you—with a purpose, I confess, because I seek only the happiness of all concerned. I am sure that you are mistaken about Sandor and Vilma."

"But what can we do?"

"We can put him to the test. We can easily find out which is the more significant—his desire to kill me this afternoon, or the little mock-sentimental passage of a few moments ago."

"How? We cannot ask him."

"You certainly cannot ask him."

"You do not propose that I shall hide and listen while you make him confess to you?"

"No, eaves-dropping would be unfair. Neither you nor he would stoop to it just now, I observed."

Jolan blushed.

"I have a plan," continued Dr. Nicholas. "We will cut the knot we cannot loosen. It is

not a new plan, but that is in its favor, for its efficacy has been proved. It would make the Sphinx betray its secret. Only, promise me that you will do as I tell without asking me for explanations. Do you consent?"

"I consent to anything," said Jolan eagerly. "Only let us put an end to this suspense."

"You have a long white silk cloak, have you not, that covers you from head to foot?"

"Yes. It has gold embroidery, and is trimmed with swan's down round the neck and all the way down the front. It was made by Paquin."

"All that is most important. We cannot fail."

"It has a Dutch neck," continued Jolan.

"Better and better," said Dr. Nicholas, adding to himself, " 'Where would I be if most women did not lose their sense of humor when they fell in love?'

"Now," he continued aloud, "go and put that cloak on. Wrap it around you so that nothing of you is visible except your neck, and the tips of your shoes. Then return here."

"But I don't see . . ."

"Of course not. You will see afterward. Remember that you have promised not to ask questions, and to do as I tell you."

"I will do it. The test sounds funny, but you talk so confidently, I really have faith in it. Sometimes, when your eyes sparkle, one might believe that all the wisdom of the world lay behind them."

"You have a very poor opinion of me."

"Well, I will put on the cloak. It sounds like a masquerade."

"Oh, yes, one thing more. Should anyone ask why you are wearing it, simply answer that you feel cold, and wrap it closer around you. Now, run before Sandor returns. . . . Oh, yes, he will be back the moment he can free himself."

Jolan mounted the stairs with decision, turned to the right, opened a small door in the marble wall, and disappeared. A moment later Sandor emerged from the ball-room.

He was pale, agitated, aggressive. His dark eyes swept the foreground, peered into the

depth of the foliage, then turned full on Dr. Nicholas.

"Who was here just now?" he asked, threateningly.

"As you see, I am all alone."

"Someone rushed out as I approached—a woman—I saw the whirl of her dress. It seems that she did not want me to see her. She did not pass me. Where has she gone?"

"There was nobody here, Sandor."

"You lie like a gentleman."

"Is that a compliment or an insult? The ethics of the gentleman are so sadly mixed nowadays that one never knows."

"There was somebody here," reiterated Sandor.

"Even if there were, it would not concern you. So why should she flee and hide? You insinuate that it is not good for a woman's reputation to be seen in my company. Oh, Sandor, Sandor, you grieve me deeply."

"Enough of this! Your cynicism revolts me, if it appears to give you amusement."

"Behold the festive bachelor contemplating

matrimony. Well, she is a charming girl. So demure, so simple, under her assumption of modernity."

"You are an ingenious devil."

"I have to be. Sandor, you are in a devil of a humor."

"I am in neither a good nor a bad humor."

"I understand," said Dr. Nicholas. "I made a bad break this afternoon. No wonder you are angry with me. I confess that it was dishonorable, but consider the circumstances, the excitement. . . . Do you believe in psychic influences? There was some strange power at work in your rooms. I felt it. Did not you? Would you have threatened to shoot me if you had been yourself? I gave you just provocation, and yet, consider: that same strange influence had me in its power, too."

"Let us talk no more about it," said Sandor irritably.

"But I must set myself right in your eyes, I cannot allow you to keep this wrong impression in your memory. I committed an unpardonable sin. I spoke lightly of a woman whom

I honor, of whom I shall always think only with the profoundest respect. I made a silly, contemptible boast. . . ."

"You are a clever fellow, Dr. Nicholas. Again I must say that you lie like a gentleman."

"Sandor, I protest. I give you my word of honor that . . ."

"What is it all to me? What is she to me? I am going to be married to the dearest girl that ever lived. For months I have been trying to make up my mind. To-night I have reached a decision."

"My congratulations and my best wishes. May she prove the One Woman who will carry you to the heights of inspiration."

"I came here to tell Jolan. I was sure that I should find her here. Why do you not confess?"

"There is nothing to confess."

"Don't you understand that all that is past?" Sandor spoke with forced lightness. "It is behind me, forgotten. You may trust me, your secret is safe with me. Why not tell me since I have surprised you both, and she thought it best to hide? Is not that a confession?"

"It is you, now, Sandor, who talks in questionable good taste."

"We have got beyond that," burst out the painter, "Jolan was here with you."

"Well, then, she was, but what of that?"

"Why did she cut and run? No, Doctor, you are not a good liar."

"I know it, Sandor, my scrupulous regard for truth has always stood in the way of my successes in this world. I am too conscientious."

Dr. Nicholas sadly shook his head.

"Since you have wormed the truth out of me," he went on, "I will tell you all. I am bound to tell you. I am in a dilemma, and only the truth can place Madame Vöröss in the true light. I promised to keep the secret; I break my promise because otherwise you would suspect worse things."

"Then there is a secret—an innocent secret. I am dying to hear it, Doctor. I assure you it will be safe with me. Ha, ha!"

"Well, then, I have told you already that I respect her too much to dare to make love to her. Remember that. And she, why, she would

never give me a thought. If you could have seen us a little while ago, when you and Mademoiselle Tôth were sitting over there, you might have observed how bored she was, and how hard it was for both of us to keep up an appearance of interest in our labored conversation. We whispered because we did not wish to disturb you. You believe me, don't you? I must insist that this is true."

Sandor glared at him with dark suspicion.

"Well, then, after you two happy beings had left us to join the merry throng, we fell to discussing the theatre, and, of course, we talked of 'Monna Vanna,' which, she told me, is having a huge success in Budapest just now.

"Somehow or other we came to consider the feelings of Vanna, not when she had entered the besieger's tent, with her high resolve to save the lives of thousands by her sacrifice, but before that, when she was on her way through the beleaguered city's streets. I said that this must have been the greater torture to her.

"Madame Vöröss disagreed. She held that the populace of the town were probably not informed of the conqueror's terms, and that Vanna's knowledge of their ignorance must have given her a feeling of absolute safety and unconcern. She said she knew this, because she was a woman, and I was not,—that a single garment sufficed to give a woman a feeling of total security, that she could walk about in it unembarrassed, so long as she was absolutely sure that those among whom she moved were unaware of her secret. And she added, with a laugh, that she must also be sure, of course, that the garment was securely fastened."

Sandor looked perplexed.

"But that bizarre conversation is no reason why she should run away the moment she saw me coming," he pointed out with great astuteness.

"Now I am coming to the secret that you have forced out of me," said Dr. Nicholas, softly. "Sandor, you don't know that woman. What a sense of humor, what reckless daring, what high spirits, what unconventionality she

hides below that dignified manner! Why, she is an inspiration of gaiety!

"Do you know what she did? She sprang up, impulsively, and said, 'I will prove to you that I am right. Wait for me here, and I will rejoin you in a few moments, in a long, white cloak. Only my neck will be visible, and the tips of my slippers. The cloak will be securely fastened, and you shall take me into the ball-room, through the corridor, and the other apartments, into the library, where the men are smoking, and back again, here. Then I shall leave you once more for a few moments, and return in my ball dress. You shall see that nobody will suspect, and that therefore I shall not be in the least embarrassed.'

"I protested, I implored, but she would not listen. She laughed at me for my timidity, treated it all as a capital joke, gave me her hand to kiss—she has beautiful hands, Sandor—and ran away. I confess, the whole affair mounted to my head a little in the end. I am waiting for her now, and, I am trembling for the possible consequences."

"It is infamous! It is not possible! It is not her doing! You suggested it to her, you fiend! You lie! You lie!"

"What is this? What is it to you? A moment ago you told me that she was indifferent to you!"

"Well, then, I confess it, I love her! I love her! I love her so much that I am willing to marry another woman to protect her against myself! But I will protect her also against you!"

They were confronting each other, Sandor beyond himself with jealousy and rage, Dr. Nicholas grim, quiet, resolute.

"I will protect her against you! I will protect her innocence, her self-respect, her good name!" shouted the painter.

"Again I ask, is that not the husband's business? Why concern yourself with other people's affairs, my Galahad in a dress-coat, my squire of ladies' absent husbands?"

"What is your purpose? What can be your pleasure in this degrading business?" Sandor looked murderous.

"I will prevent her," he said, more collectedly, "and I will drive you from this house, which you pollute."

"The husband's business again," sneered Dr. Nicholas. "Listen, Sandor, know the truth. We are rivals still. I, too, love her, and I will win her, because you, poor, vacillating thing, are of two minds. You dare not take her, but you would frustrate him who dares. Your love is but small jealousy a dog-in-the-manger feeling, adorned with high-sounding sentiments."

Sandor sprang at him, his fingers curved like claws. Dr. Nicholas quickly stepped back, and said,

"I suppose you would reach for that revolver once more, you murderous madman, but this time it is I who have it."

The little door on the landing opened. The two sprang apart, Sandor hastily composing his features.

Jolan advanced to the head of the steps, slowly, with dignity. She was wrapped from head to foot in a long, white cloak, which her beautiful hand clutched tightly around her.

The painter observed that she evaded Dr. Nicholas's look, and that she blushed as she addressed him.

"Sandor," she said tranquilly, "I have not had a chance to speak to you all evening."

He continued to stare at her, incredulous, bewildered, with ever growing fury.

"The ball is a great success," continued the low, level voice above him, "and is not the house beautiful?"

Sandor remained silent.

"My young friend is a little out of sorts this evening," said Dr. Nicholas, "not at all in the proper festive mood."

"Happiness makes me silent," muttered Sandor between his clenched teeth. "I am blessed to-night with the love of a good girl, modest and pure."

"Oh, Sandor, then it is true? I congratulate you."

Jolan carefully grasped the cloak with her left hand, and held out the right.

"I have already congratulated him," broke in the Doctor.

"It's disgusting how delighted everybody is with me this evening," the painter burst out. "I must be getting awfully common-place. I can foresee the time when I shall be the popular painter of rich women's portraits."

"What is the matter, Sandor? You announce your engagement, we congratulate you, and you answer with a sarcastic speech."

"He has said worse things to me," complained the Doctor.

"Why do you wear that cloak?" Sandor broke out, unable to control himself any longer.

"Why should I not wear it? It is very handsome, and I may be cold."

"Take it off! No, no, go back to your apartments!"

His voice rose to a shriek.

Jolan looked at him in astonishment, then turned to Dr. Nicholas, as if for enlightenment, but he merely made a discreet motion with his head.

"Go back! I say," shouted Sandor, now beyond all self-control. "I command you! Go back!"

"No one commands me but my husband," said Jolan, with dignity, "and his commands are always phrased as requests."

She turned from him, and confronted Dr. Nicholas.

"Come, Doctor," she said, "give me your arm, and take me in. My guests must miss me."

Sandor sprang up the stairs, and barred the entrance to the ball-room.

"No one must leave this place," he whispered hoarsely. "No one shall leave this place until you have gone up to your room, and returned in your ball dress."

The woman looked at him intently, ponderingly for a moment. A suspicion, too confused to take tangible shape, dawned in her mind. What was there behind this strange stratagem of that mysterious man? She made up her mind.

"Sandor," she said with calm dignity, "will you help me to remove my cloak?"

Sandor could not believe his ears. In the state of excitement that he had reached, his reasoning power was paralyzed.

"Never!" he whispered, still instinctively keeping his voice down, there, so near the ballroom. "Never! Oh, Jolan!"

The woman's mind was still groping for the solution of the mystery. Again she turned to the Doctor for some token, but he stood motionless, intently watching.

"Sandor," she said a second time, with infinite patience, "will you help me to remove my cloak?"

"I dare not. . . . I cannot."

She turned to Dr. Nicholas.

"Dr. Nicholas, will you help me to remove my cloak?"

But he, too, preserved a puzzled silence.

"Go back to your room, Jolan," implored Sandor now, humbly. Then, with a new access of fury, he burst into an insulting laugh.

"Monna Jolan!" he said.

At last she understood. The red crept slowly up from her cheeks to her forehead, it suffused her ears, it mantled the fine white neck. A light of comprehension came into her eyes, to give way to an angry flame.

"Monna Jolan," she repeated. She had seen Maeterlinck's play. Everything was clear to her.

"What did you say to him about this cloak?" she asked sternly of Dr. Nicholas.

"I told him that you had gone to put it on."

"You told him more."

"A little. Remember, you promised to ask no questions."

"There is no need of questions. I understand. Shame upon you. And shame upon you, Sandor, for suspecting me. It is ignoble, unspeakably low and vile. It is your doing, Dr. Nicholas. Now be satisfied, and go."

"You do not play fair. I proposed an experiment to you, and you consented. It has succeeded. You have seen him in the full revelation of his love, his jealousy. Now that you know, now that all your uncertainty has been set at rest, you would drive me from the house. You ought to thank me instead."

"And Sandor believed him," Jolan said to herself, half-aloud. "Sandor believed this of me!"

Then aloud, with infinite contempt, she added, "And these are men!"

Laszlo Vöröss entered the conservatory hastily.

"Ah! here you are, Jolan," he said briskly. "I have been looking for you. Some of the guests are leaving, and they wish to thank you and to say good-night."

"Laszlo," his wife answered with unwonted tenderness, "help me to remove my cloak."

She dropped the garment into his waiting arms, and stood there in her ball-dress, the jewels glittering on her corsage. One look she cast upon the two men, then, taking Vöröss's arm, she swept proudly from their presence.

CHAPTER X

THE DEVIL'S LETTER

LEFT alone with Dr. Nicholas, Sandor glared at him, and asked threateningly,

"What does it mean, this trick? Ha! You have played your game well. She despises me, and you—you have the field to yourself. But I will foil you yet."

He advanced, murderous intention in his gleaming eyes.

Without moving a step, Dr. Nicholas put his hand in his hip pocket, pulled out the revolver, and offered it to the painter, who took it eagerly, yet amazed at so foolhardy an act.

"Be careful," said the other, mockingly, "it is loaded. Right between the shoulder blades, you know."

He squarely turned his back, and lounged towards one of the chairs, taking out his cigarette case as he did so. He stopped to light the

cigarette, still with his back towards Sandor, then turned around again and sat down composedly.

Sandor, who had raised the pistol, lowered it, approached him slowly, and laid the revolver before him.

"I do not shoot men in the back," he said, "nor do I kill unarmed men. You are still my guest, remember. I will see you to-morrow morning."

Vilma entered at this moment, in cloak and hood, followed by her muffled chaperon.

"I am going, Sandor," she said; "will you see us to our carriage? Good-night, Dr. Nicholas."

The Doctor rose, and made his most ceremonious bow.

"Good night, Mademoiselle Tôth. I have had a most interesting chat with you."

Sandor mounted the steps, and followed the two women.

Left alone, Dr. Nicholas picked up the revolver, put it back into his pocket, and remarked to the tip of his cigarette,

"If I had not given him that revolver to kill me with, none knows what might have happened. He might have hit me with his fist, someone might have seen us, a duel would have followed—my duels can have but one ending,—and I would have had my trouble for my pains. It would have spoiled all my plans, such artistic plans, too. Not in a long time have I been so interested."

He smoked on, calmly, contentedly, waiting. Jolan would return, of this he was sure, to find whom—him or the other man? It was the same thing in the end.

She did not return to the conservatory at the end of a little time. Her glance passed over him, and sought Sandor, in the darkest corners of the leafy, fronded masses.

"Where is he?" she asked anxiously.

"He is gone. He is mad—mad with love, mad with hatred, mad with trust in you, mad with suspicion of you, mad with jealousy of me. Now that you know, what are you going to do? Are you going to let him pay the cost? You have robbed him of his peace of mind, of

the slim chance of contentment he had in a life without you—he will never marry another now. What are you going to do?"

"I know the course I have to take."

"You are never going to see him again, you are going to dismiss him, to send him away from you, despair in his heart. He will never paint again, but what is that compared with your stolid comfort?"

"You are unsettling me again. When I entered my mind was made up. Why do you talk like that?"

"Reflect well. The step you are about to take will be irreparable."

"I want it to be irreparable. We both shall suffer, Vilma will suffer, but it is the only way."

"You love him still?"

"Yes, I love him more than ever."

"Because he tried to kill me?"

"I love him for that, I love him because he forbade me to carry out the disgraceful action of which you had led him to suspect me."

"But he believed me."

Jolan stood silent. This man, with his devil-

ish ingenuity, played upon her emotions as upon an instrument. She had been a toy in his hands since that moment when he had made his first bow to her, earlier in the day. He had swept away the barriers of her reserve, the results of six years' sternest schooling, he had given her passion wings to aspire to the heights, he had fanned the consuming flames of jealousy and hatred in her breast. He had tricked her, insinuated gross insults, suggested—nay, preached unspeakable things. She had bidden him not to enter her house, she had told him to leave it, and yet—here she was listening to him, under her husband's roof, swayed by his words, and—most strangely of all, still looking to him for advice and guidance.

"But he believed me," said Dr. Nicholas once more.

The feeling of outrage swept over her again. The agony of that brief hour again stood out in all its vividness. Sandor had made love to another woman before her eyes, that other woman had mocked her, defied her, had borne him off in triumph, and then—he had returned

to put upon her the indelible stigma of an unworthy suspicion. Her feelings tossed her hither and thither, from forgiveness to bitterest resentment, from love to hate, from renunciation to the wildest assertion of her rights to him. Would this never end?

She reeled. Then a great weariness came over her. She had been walking rapidly up and down; now she sank down on the chair near Dr. Nicholas.

"You can never forgive him for this," he whispered, "and you realize it. But you love him still, and he loves you. Would it not be kindest to end his suspense and yours? One moment of decision, and all is over, beyond recall. Make up your mind."

She looked at him, her vision blurred by scalding tears.

"You are right," she said. "There is but one way out."

She began to fumble nervously at the edge of the table before her. It opened up, revealing a small writing-desk, fully equipped.

"This was to have been my morning seat,"

she explained with a sad little smile. "Here I would have attended to the affairs of my household. I shall never sit here now."

She took out an envelope, addressed it, then held it out to him.

"You are going to write to Sandor? Yes, that is the only way."

"Please do not talk to me, I must get this over before my husband comes to look for me. I told him that I had a headache . . . that I wished to be alone for a while here, where it is cool, but . . . he never leaves me alone for long. He, too, loves me, in his own way.

"You will take this letter to Sandor for me, will you not?" she continued softly, "and be kind and patient with him. Do not quarrel with him any more, for my sake. He needs friendship now, the poor boy, and rest. I hope that he will sleep; I feel as if I never shall close my eyes again. Oh, if we had only parted in friendship, after that beautiful moment of this afternoon. Now his last thought of me will be one of bitterness."

"He will think often of you, Jolan, as you will think of him, with regret, with longing."

She softly wiped her eyes, and stared before her at the paper.

"You are weakening again," said Dr. Nicholas. "Steel your heart, and write."

"I cannot, oh, I cannot."

"Forget your love, and remember only the insult he has offered you. Let your letter burn with righteous indignation, let there be no possibility of misinterpretation."

"I cannot make you out, Dr. Nicholas. You have done me more harm than can ever be atoned for, yet now in the end, your advice is sincere, and wise."

"I regret indeed . . ."

"I am not angry with you any more. What matters all else that has happened? This crisis was bound to come sooner or later. You have merely hastened its coming.

"By the time he gets this letter," she continued bravely, "I shall be my old self again. But, oh, it is hard to write. How shall I begin?"

"Will you permit me to render you one more service?"

"Which is?"

"As you have just said, I precipitated this crisis, even though I did not cause it. You have been taken unawares, unprepared. You do not know what to say. I began this, let me finish it. It's only right that I should dictate this letter—I who am cool and disinterested. It shall be a scathing letter, conclusive and dignified. I will be cruel where you would be merciful and falter—the great mistake against which you must guard."

"You wish to do this?"

"Yes, I know exactly what to say. It must be curt, pointed, final."

Jolan looked up at him. He looked sympathetic. She took a decision.

"Very well," she said. "Dictate."

"I give you fair warning. It will be a crushing letter."

She answered simply:

"I am ready."

"Then begin."

He stepped behind her, and leaned lightly over the back of her chair, looking over her shoulder.

"Monsieur: This letter will make it clear to you that you shall never see me again. If it fails in this, it is written in vain. My resolution is taken. Do not attempt to write to me, do not try to see me, seek no interview with me, make no inquiries. I shall see to it that we never meet. I charge you upon your honor not to make my task harder than it need be. I must be as one dead to you—"

"As one dead to you," whispered Jolan, the tears gushing again into her eyes.

"Dead to you," repeated the voice at her ear.

"This evening I put you to the test,—the highest test of the respectful, honorable love which I believed you had for me. I knew the meaning of that test, Sandor, when I made it, I felt so certain of you."

The pen stopped rushing over the paper.

Jolan furtively wiped her eyes. Then she resolutely took up a fresh sheet, and looked up sideways.

"I am ready," she repeated.

"And you," dictated Dr. Nicholas, "you outraged my trust, before another, you repaid me with an insult that fills my heart with resentment and grief. Only a few hours before you had left me, after that one brief moment of innocent surrender, with my command laid upon you to forget me, to let things be as they had been before, to preserve the glorious innocence of a secret attachment which harmed none, and which was as a fragrance of flowers in my inner life. Oh, the peace that filled me,—the pride I felt in temptation overcome, in the wisdom that had the strength to select the right road and tread it. I was so sure of your chivalry, your manhood, your championship of me, of the purity of the shrine which, I knew, you had created for me in the innermost sanctum of your heart."

Jolan took up another sheet. She was writing mechanically now, her brain intent upon the

sound of the words whispered into her ear, and not upon their meaning—tracing it all back into the past, remembering, reconstructing, and —idealizing the memory.

She came to herself, and her pen flew over the paper, overtaking the words that for a moment had fallen upon an unhearing ear.

"You deceived me, Sandor, you have always lied to me. It was not you whom I trusted that protected us both against ourselves; it was I, in my weakness, my misplaced trust in you, who was our tower of strength against temptation. You were but biding your time. Your suspicion proved the value you set upon my honor. This love of yours, ah, how blind women are when they love—I see it now in all its gross unworthiness. I have lost forever my peace of mind and soul. I feel as if I shall never sleep again. I suffer for myself and for you. I could not give him love, but I gave him loyalty; I was a faithful wife, and now! I have wronged him only in thought, but that is enough to abase me in my own eyes forever. You know how well I had planned it all for the best, for

the best of all of us, and then—what happened? How did it happen, and why?

"I was carried away, suddenly, irresistibly—overmastered by emotions long controlled. I saw you passing out of my life, and I was loath to let you go without a sign, without a single moment's union of our souls. We were entitled to that, Sandor, in the face of the sacrifice we were about to make."

Dr. Nicholas stopped. Jolan bent forward, and buried her face in her hands. It had been so sweet, so innocent, and now! A tender longing welled up in her heart. A wave of the love that understands fully and forgives overwhelmed her.

The man at her shoulder bent forward lower still, and whispered softly, with infinite pity, that engendered self-pity in her, the rest of the letter:

"I did not know that I needed you so much. I wondered if you needed me. I saw you with Vilma, and my jealousy flamed up. I must know the deepest profundities of your love for

me. And so I tested you, confident of the outcome. I was not myself; love and the fear of losing you ruled me. You outraged me, yet in my heart I jubilated, 'He loves me! He loves me!' And that is why I am sending you away forever—because we love each other beyond words, with a power that would overwhelm us. I love you, yes, I love you, Sandor! That is why you must never see me again. That is the price you must pay for this confession. I have said too much, and yet so little! And now, my king, my own, farewell! This is our first true meeting, it is also our parting. I shall never see you again."

The voice stopped. Jolan stared at the sheet before her.

"Now sign," commanded Dr. Nicholas, and as in a trance she obeyed. "Jolan," she wrote, and nothing more.

The doctor snatched the letter from under her trembling hand, folded the sheets, stuffed them into the envelope, closed it, and put it into his pocket.

"A dignified letter," he said, "gentle and yet

severe. He cannot mistake your meaning, he will obey you, he will never try to see you again. Poor boy! I shall be there to-morrow to give him courage. I will advise him to move to Vienna at once. Perhaps Vilma will make him forget in time."

"You fiend!" burst out Jolan, tortured beyond the power of endurance. "Does it give you pleasure to stab me to the heart with your words?"

"The physician often has to hurt in order to cure. Only a child hates him for it."

"What have I written?" wailed Jolan. "You told me, and I held the pen. Give me back that letter; you shall not give it to him."

"I will give it to him to-morrow, when I see him. To-night I have to attend to important business. But he shall have it before I leave at four."

"Give it back to me! I do not wish him to read it. I would rather give it to my husband than to him."

"My conscience forbids me to undo the good work you have begun. It would be weakness

in me, weakness in you, to let you destroy it. Hush! Here is your husband."

As he turned away from her chair, and nonchalantly went to meet Vöröss at the foot of the stairs, Dr. Nicholas said softly to himself:

"Unless I am very much mistaken, she will deliver the Postscript to him to-morrow in person."

Aloud, he continued:

"What a colossal success, Monsieur Vöröss, your wife's ball has been! It will be the talk of the capital for a week. A feast worthy of the hosts, and of their superb mansion.

"Madame Vöröss is a little overcome," he continued. "She came here, she told me, for a moment's repose, and kept me for a little chat. That is why I have stayed so unpardonably late. But now I am off. Before I go, however, let me apologize for dampening the spirits of some of your guests in the library. Believe me, I did it unwillingly, at the request of someone whom I need not name. You understand? They may have been momentarily disconcerted, but they will know by now that a kindly inten-

tion, more potent than my own, was behind the words I spoke to them. If they but heed them, they will find their profit. As for the ladies—oh, yes, I suppose I have been rude to them, too,—you will find that I have put new ideas into the heads of two of them—ideas, I flatter myself, that will send their pens flying over the paper. The Countess—well, she is a little American radical, who dares not believe in the permanence of class distinctions, but cherishes her title none the less, and probably has coronets on her *lingerie* wherever there is room for them. Such inconsistencies are not rare, you know. Lassalle, you will remember, while preaching the socialistic state, pretended that he was of noble birth, and clapped a *de* before his name. Well, the Countess did not respect my prejudices, which I have inherited and dare not drop, and so I got even. But I made my peace with her. A charming woman.

"And now I must make my adieus. Madame Vörösss, I cannot thank you enough for a charming evening. It has been profitable as well as pleasant. I feel that not a single moment of

my time has been wasted. I kiss your hand, gracious lady, and wish you a good night."

He bowed low.

"One moment, Doctor," said Jolan. "Was there not a paper here somewhere, which I asked you to give . . ."

"To your husband. Oh, yes, let me see. . . . An advertisement of an automobile was it not, or a communication of some kind? I remember that it was not addressed to him. . . . One moment, Monsieur Vöröss, I will find it."

He began to look on the disordered desk, under it, under the chairs, then to search his pockets.

"Never mind," said Jolan, pale with terror of this unaccountable person, whose actions appeared to be governed by no rules of conduct known to her, who might carry out this infernal, hidden threat without compunction,— "Never mind, it does not matter."

"Then once more, good night, and a good night's rest. I shall carry away from Budapest the pleasantest memories."

He mounted the stairs, and disappeared

through the door of the ball-room, Vöröss accompanying him to the front door, enchanted with the easy intimacy of this distinguished stray guest.

Returning to the conservatory immediately the door had been closed behind this last departing guest by a butler assisted by two footmen, Vöröss said exultingly to Jolan, sitting there the picture of dejection:

"Isn't he charming? Such tact! Ah, blood will tell say what one will. You heard his explanation? He made it so that I may reassure the others to-morrow. Who knows, Jolan, perhaps you will be some day soon the Baroness Vöröss de Kis-Szallás. I knew what I did when I bought that estate. Your husband always looks ahead."

Jolan made an effort to present her customary appearance of placid, but genuine interest in all his affairs, but failed for the first time since her marriage.

"Ah, yes, the future," she replied. "Why look beyond to-day?"

Her husband looked at her quickly.

"Poor girl," he said. An expression of infinite tenderness came into his masterful eyes, and relaxed the grim, inexorable mouth.

"Poor girl," he repeated, approaching her. "You are all done up, and no wonder. It is the woman who pays for a social success like this. Well, you shall have your reward—shall we say that brougham lined with white leather that you liked so much the other day? Or a new tiara, or a ring? Take me with you to select it, dear, if I can possibly find the time. You know that you fare better when you take me along than when you go alone. Ah, yes, the prudent housewife of a man who is so rich that you could not squander his money if you tried. It is I who am the spendthrift where you are concerned,—my treasure."

He approached her fondly, sat down beside her, and softly stroked her arm.

She snatched it away from him, a sudden active dislike replacing her customary passive submission to his endearments.

"Please leave me alone, Laszlo," she pleaded. "Do not talk to me, do not stay here with me.

I am all unstrung, my nerves are on edge, I feel as if I would scream aloud."

Vörösss looked seriously disturbed.

"Shall I tell them to telephone to the stables to send a carriage for the doctor?" he asked.

"The Doctor? No! No! Yes!"

In her excited state, she could only think of Dr. Nicholas. She recovered herself in a moment. Him she could not recall; not even her husband with all his money could bring back that letter to her.

"The doctor could do me no good," she said wearily. "Just leave me alone. Leave me, Laszlo, please do."

"But it is after four."

"I know, I know. I shall retire in a little while. Just go. You need rest yourself. You will be up again to-morrow early. Your affairs never seem to stop for half a day."

"Well, then, I will leave you. But take care that you do not catch cold. Ah, here is your cloak. I will wrap it around you."

She stood up, and submitted to having the hated garment wrapped tenderly around her by

his large, clumsy hands. Then she stiffened herself under his good-night kiss.

Was this physical repugnance to be added to her tortures, she wondered. Was all peace on this earth at an end for her?

The moment she was alone, she snatched the cloak from her shoulders, as if it burned them, and flung it from her. Then she sat down again, to renewed thought, troubled, confused, in a labyrinth of self-torture from which there was no escape.

At last she roused herself, wearily mounted the steps, and slowly dragged the finery of her train through the palatial empty spaces of her new home, a prison now to which she felt condemned for life. She let her maid undress her, donned a mink-lined dressing-gown, and dismissed her for the night. There would be no sleep for her, and so she approached the window to await before it the slow coming of the late winter dawn.

She looked out. Her heart stopped beating.

For, on the wall of the house opposite her own palace, she saw the shadow of Dr. Nich-

olas, enlarged a hundredfold, his eagle nose and salient chin jutting out sharply in the silhouette, his high hat with its flat brim set deep upon his forehead, smoking his eternal cigarette.

What was he doing there so late? Was he watching the house? Was he expecting Sandor?

CHAPTER XI

THE DEVIL'S WISDOM AND WOMAN'S

It was half past two of the afternoon following the Vöröss ball. Dr. Nicholas, immaculate as ever, clear of eye, alert of body and mind, was seated in Sandor's den, desultorily reading a Jókai novel. He was waiting.

He had come back to his host's home at six, had smoked cigarettes and drunk brandy till seven. Then, replenishing the fire with his own aristocratic, capable hands, he had taken a leisurely bath, had been shaved and groomed by André, and had sent him out for the papers, which he read over a cup of delicious Vienna coffee, made for him by the valet, whose admiration he had won.

"Here is a true *viveur*," the experienced servant in many bachelor homes had said to himself,—"a real man of the world. He dances all night, drinks his share of the champagne, no

doubt, finishes the night with a decanter of brandy, goes without sleep, and in the morning, instead of being grumpy, he is as pleasant and polite as one can wish. Ah yes, blood will tell. And the free way he has with his gold pieces! That proves he is a prince. Only people who have never had to work for their money fling it around like that, without hesitation or thought of its value."

Now the bell rang. André hastened through the room, closed the door behind him, and was heard to answer a whispered question.

The Doctor looked expectant. André returned, holding the knob of the closed door firmly behind him.

"What is it?"

"There's a lady here who insists that she must see Monsieur Tatray."

"What kind of a lady?"

"A real lady, sir."

"A real lady or a real real lady?"

André smiled deferentially.

"A real real lady, sir," he said. "I told her that Monsieur Tatray had come home very late

from the ball, and is still sleeping. She answered that she would wait."

"Do you know this lady?"

"She has never been here before, sir."

"Show her in."

André disappeared, and a moment later, bowing deeply, with genuine respect, ushered in Vilma Tôth. He was an experienced servant who had observed much in his long career, and was master of infinite nuances of deference.

"Ah," said Dr. Nicholas, rising, with his best bow. "Good morning, *Gnaediges Fraulien,* I kiss your hand."

She gave him her hand in a distracted sort of way, looking about the room the while, taking in its every detail. Then she sat down, Dr. Nicholas following her example.

"Good morning, Doctor. I did not expect to see you here. Are you Sandor's secretary?"

"I am his friend, philosopher, and guide. I came here on purpose to teach him the beauty of the line of least resistance. It is mere accident that you find me still here. I depart to-

night, for I have reason to believe that my work is accomplished."

"Tell me, Dr. Nicholas, who are you? Last night at the ball everybody said that you were a Royal Highness incognito."

"Ah, mademoiselle, I am a Somebody in disguise. People never recognize me until after I have gone, too late to thank me properly. I play many parts, I am always busy—there is always work for idle hands to do. Never mind the usual meaning of the proverb. As I use it, it is very true. I am a diplomat and a man of business, attending to my own affairs, which are flourishing, thank you, owing to my own exertions and the willing collaboration of many men and women. I have enemies—who has not? Yet many who think themselves my doughtiest opponents are in reality my allies. I once dwelt for six weeks in the home of one of the bitterest of them—in an archiepiscopal palace. When I departed, he thanked me for having shown him his real duty, which happened to point in the direction of the realization of his desires.

"I am also a multimillionaire, whose consuming ambition it is to do good and die poor. That's why I shall live many, many more years. Charity is with me a passion, and it taxes my ingenuity. It keeps me awake at night, so that I often fall asleep in the daytime from sheer exhaustion. That happened to me yesterday afternoon, here in this very room, while I was waiting for Sandor, and . . . but no matter. I must not be indiscreet. To continue, I have put up the price of coal, for the mere pleasure of founding asylums for the freezing poor. I have cut the wages of my employees that I might have the philanthropist's pure joy of opening soup kitchens.

"I am an author, too. 'Experimental Matrimony,' 'The Higher Moral Law,' 'Salvation through Success,' 'The Protective Tariff as a Means of Grace,' 'War and Desolation as the Highest Good'—I see you recognize the titles. But I am nothing if not anonymous, and I am able to preserve my anonymity because those who know my real self are always the first to hide their knowledge from the world. Yes,

those whom I benefit are loyal to me, indeed. I have great faith in humanity.

"I see much of the world. I philosophize much upon its tangled affairs. Therefore people say that I really possess wisdom. I am the original pragmatist. I am always ready to aid and advise those who seek my assistance. You did so last night. Have I failed you?"

"You gave me good advice, I admit, but it failed."

"Perhaps you came too late to me; your case may have been beyond cure. I have known such instances; they are very sad. A great man once said to me in his old age, 'I look back with horror upon a well-spent life.'"

"Now you are talking nonsense again. Are you engaged just now in writing a book of paradoxes or maxims? Your conversation sounds like it."

"The impudent, the unconventional Vilma again!"

"Yes, the impudent, the unconventional Vilma again. That's what *I* want to talk about to *you*. I shan't add to your stock of paradoxes, either.

My talk will be straight from the shoulder."

"It seems that you are discontented with me. I can only regret that you believe you have cause to question the wisdom of my advice. Pardon me a moment. Are you going to scold me?"

"Most severely."

"Then stand up and tower over me, an image of righteous indignation. Believe me, it gives a woman a great advantage over a man to be standing while he is sitting down. By-and-by, when it is my turn to speak, I shall get up excitedly. You remain standing. I may grow angry, I may talk in a loud voice, threateningly. You will contradict me. That will be a mistake. When I am in full career, shouting my side of the question, my intolerable wrongs, you must suddenly plump down in a chair, press your lips tight, look at your hands in your lap, and begin to fumble with your handkerchief. You may say, 'Well!' in the indescribable voice reserved by woman to express her contempt of the irrational male,—but no more. Then watch —a woman need not look to see—then watch

me. I shall look at you, I shall become disconcerted, I shall begin to stammer. My eloquence will flicker out like a guttering candle. I hope there will be no cause for you to follow this advice in the present instance. I merely give it to you because you will find it of inestimable service in the management of men, especially of husbands."

"Thank you very much," said Vilma with suspicious gravity, "but the fact is, I knew all that when I was ten years old. I used such measures with our excitable French teacher at school."

Dr. Nicholas looked just the least bit foolish.

"To return to our subject," he said hastily, "what is your grievance against me?"

"Last night you advised me to change my tactics with Sandor, to be reserved where I had been frank, demure where I had been daring, modest where I had been unconventional. Well, I had my victory till we reëntered the ball-room. The moment our dance was over, he dropped me in a seat and hurried back to the conservatory. I saw him, conceal his move-

ments though he might. I was busy flirting with the Count, just to exasperate his wife. She thinks that she can flirt with everybody, but that nobody must flirt with him. A woman has many things to attend to at a ball; it is not all dancing and thoughtless amusement."

"I am glad to see that you do not take the marriage plans made for you with undue seriousness."

"You think that you are a wise man! You flatter yourself that you know women! Oh, my heart was breaking last night when I appeared most recklessly gay."

"Then you . . . ?"

"I have resolved to return to my old tactics. Yours have failed. I am the old Vilma again, you understand. Impudent, unconventional, emancipated. I will fight that woman with her own tactics. That's why I am here."

"I see."

"I have never been here before, you know," continued Vilma.

"So André told me. He treated you with the respect due to what he called a 'real real lady.' "

"He treated me with prudent reserve. He did not know what to make of me. He resolved to stay on the fence, so as to be safe. It was very amusing."

"It was very daring of you to come here at all. Poor André! A lady who is a real lady, who announces that she is not married, and who yet arrives without maid or chaperon—what was he to make of that?"

"I came here without a chaperon because she will come without a maid. I shall place myself upon even terms with her."

"But she will come often. You know, Sandor is going to paint her portrait."

"I want Sandor to paint mine, and so I shall come every day."

"You mean that you want to come here every day, and so you are going to have Sandor paint your portrait?"

"You are impudent. I once boxed the ears of a man who kissed me."

"I once kissed a lady who boxed my ears."

"You are just like a dancing master," said Vilma, lifting her little nose disdainfully.

" 'Forward—backward.' I hope it amuses you. I am serious. I'll be here every day, alone with him. I'll make him look at me, I'll make him *see* me, I'll talk to him, I'll make love to him, and—I shall win."

"You will lose. Last night I had high hopes of being able to help you. I had the utmost confidence in the advice I gave you, but now. . . . Well, I confess that I am defeated. I shall depart in an hour or so a much disappointed man."

"You really believe that?" Vilma looked discouraged.

Dr. Nicholas reached into his pocket, and produced the vanity case.

"You need not fear," said the girl scornfully. "I am not going to cry"

"I am not afraid of women who cry. It is the perfectly happy women I am afraid of. They do not want me around."

"Well, I shall win."

"My dear young lady, believe me, you will lose. I have acknowledged my defeat. I can do nothing more. Events must take their

course. My advice to you now, which you will not take, of course, is to go away and never come back. Sandor loves that other woman—wait a moment—he loves her within the bounds of the most scrupulous esteem."

"I know those bounds of scrupulous esteem. It is the esteem with which I shall inspire him that will bring me victory."

"Your coming here will make him suspect that you come to catch a husband."

"It is true. I love the truth."

"A weakness of the young, that is. What would become of social life without lies? Men and women are so much alike that existence would become a bore if they all fell to telling each other the same truth, day after day."

"Now you are manufacturing more epigrams. This is very serious to me, Doctor Nicholas. I have made up my mind."

Vilma got up impatiently, and began to move about the room, inspecting its ornaments and knicknacks, recognizing their value, straightening a vase here, a little bronze there, paying attention to the details before judging the effect

of the whole, as is a woman's way. She nodded her head approvingly, and said:

"A very nice room, just what an artist's apartment should be. Beautiful things, and good taste in the arrangement."

She wandered farther away, Dr. Nicholas standing beside the fire, in his favorite attitude, caressing his chin, and watching her closely. The portrait of Fanny on its easel attracted her attention, and she stood contemplating it for a little while, her head a little on one side.

"Good brush work," she commented briefly. "I have seen that face before."

"It is a capital picture," answered Dr. Nicholas, craftily.

"Now, where have I seen that face before?"

"I believe it has been reproduced in the illustrated papers."

The girl turned upon him, and stamped her foot.

"Who is she?" she asked imperiously.

"Oh, I did not catch the drift of your question."

"My questions do not drift, they go right to the point."

"Well, then, that is the famous Fanny."

"Fanny the model! I might have known."

She studied the painting intently, then said slowly:

"So there are three of us. I had forgotten that."

"Poor Fanny," said Dr. Nicholas. "Oh, yes, she, too, loves him. She has been waiting in that room over there since early this morning to see him. All she can do is to count his handkerchiefs and mend his socks. She is not intellectual, you know, not educated. That is her way of showing her love, of serving him. The only way she knows. She gives all she has to give gladly, without reserve, and—without hope. It is touching."

"Fanny is a bad woman."

"Indeed, she is not. She is merely a thoughtless one, but she is good. You say you will win; I advise you to renounce. And Fanny is a good example of resignation. You should see her. It can do you no harm,

you are so far above her; it may do you good."

"I will see her."

Dr. Nicholas softly stepped across the room, opened the door into the inner apartment, and said:

"Good morning, Fanny. There is someone here who wishes to talk to you."

Fanny entered, pale, haggard, with swollen eyes, humbly, deprecatingly. One eager look around showed her that it was not Sandor who wished to see her. Dr. Nicholas, humming softly *Dalla sua pace* to himself, slipped behind her through the door he had just opened, and closed it behind him, leaving the two women alone.

The model advanced, and dropped a little curtsey. Vilma looked at her. She was very handsome, very dark, very plump, restless in her movements, but graceful withal. And—yes, Dr. Nicholas was right, she was a good girl. Her face showed that.

"You wish to see me, Madame?" asked Fanny curiously.

"Yes. You are Fanny, are you not?"

"I am Fanny the model. Are you waiting to see Monsieur Sandor, too?"

Vilma ignored the question.

"Why do you call me Madame?"

"I see you are here alone, unchaperoned. You are not a model, everybody can see that, so I thought you were a married lady."

She added, with the unembarrassed inquisitiveness of her class:

"Are you going to have your portrait painted?"

"Perhaps. My name is Vilma Tôth."

"Oh! I have heard of you. You are very rich, are you not? And you are going to marry Sandor."

The tears rolled down Fanny's cheeks. She let them fall without attempt to hide them. She had no false notions of dignity.

"He has sent me away," she sobbed, "now that he is going to marry you."

Vilma's proud spirit revolted. No, she would not marry him, she would not stoop to this labyrinth of rivalry—three women competing for a

man! She blushed as the situation suddenly revealed itself to her. Why had she come? Had Dr. Nicholas's advice to her of the night before been right, after all? Had he foreseen her renunciation the moment she had come, full of her plan, confident of its success?

She saw the vanity case which the Doctor had placed upon the table a moment ago; she took it with a whimsical smile, and seated herself.

"Sit down, Fanny," she said.

She opened the dainty case, admiring it the while, took out the handkerchief, another one, neatly pressed and folded—wonderful man, that Dr. Nicholas! she reflected,—and gravely handed it to Fanny, who dabbed her eyes with it convulsively.

"I want to talk to you, Mademoiselle Fanny," she announced.

"What do you wish to know?" Fanny's blunt directness was disconcerting. How did people get along with each other in her circle, Vilma wondered. The model continued, without stopping to take breath:

"I'll tell you everything about myself. I'm

not ashamed, I've no reason to be. I earn my bread by hard, honest work. I am an artist, too, you know. First I sang in the chorus, then I did a turn in a *Tingeltangel*—a music-hall, you know. Oh, nothing great. I was not a star. There I got acquainted with a dry-goods clerk, who told me he was a member of the firm. He was a snappy dresser, and I thought he was the real thing. I had no experience then, you see. Now I know better. I was always falling in love in those days. It's my artistic temperament. I know that it is, for a gentleman friend told me so. He owned a boiler factory. Then Sandor saw me, and said I must pose for him. That's the picture over there. They called it 'A Daughter of the Pusta.' It's for sale in all the picture shops, in beautiful frames, with red, white, and green ribbons at the top. Sandor says it's a shame that they treat it like a chromo, but I don't see it. I'm very proud of it."

Vilma sat silent under this torrent of revelation of a side of life that had been carefully kept from her.

"That was three years ago," continued Fanny. "The picture made Sandor famous. André thinks it's his ugly face that did it, but I know better. He's jealous of me, that's what's the matter with him. Well, Sandor was very good to me, he let me take care of his things. Men are so helpless without a woman to look after them."

"Is that part of a model's duties?" asked Vilma, from the depth of her amazement.

"If she's an artist's *real* model, she looks after his collars and cuffs and handkerchiefs and things. André was always trying to tell me to butt out, but he was afraid to say too much. He knew better. Sandor was always praising me, and always painting me, whenever he had no sitters that paid. I was so h—h—happy, and then . . . four weeks ago . . . he began . . . painting landscapes. . . . I knew what that meant. Oh! Oh!"

Vilma hastily handed her the powder puff, the little mirror, and then tumbled the case into her lap.

"Isn't that a beautiful thing?" she asked.

Fanny forgot her grief, and fell to admiring the jewel-studded bauble with sparkling eyes.

"It's nice to be rich," she sighed.

Vilma rejoiced to see that her stratagem had averted a storm, wondering the while at the primitive simplicity of this strange woman's emotional processes. Aloud she said:

"Yes, it is very beautiful, but it isn't mine, you know. It belongs to Dr. Nicholas."

"The gentleman who was here? I know him. Isn't he grand? He was very kind to me, and made me feel better."

"Did he?"

"Yes, he gave me tea with a little rum, and some sandwiches. Have you never noticed what a difference it makes when you're sad, and you eat a hearty meal? I once went to a funeral, and it was very sad. The cemetery was a long way off, and we grew sadder and sadder—a sinking feeling, you know. Well, when we got back to the house, late in the afternoon, everybody was miserable. Then we had a good meal—*goulash* and pancakes, and wine,

and coffee. When it was over we all felt quite cheerful again. We'd quite forgotten the dear departed. It's very strange," mused Fanny in conclusion, holding up the vanity case in her well-made, muscular hand, and making the jewels sparkle.

Vilma mused a little. Might this be her remedy, too? Her instinctive aloofness thawed a little, she was now strangely interested in this unknown type.

"Was that all Dr. Nicholas did for you?" she asked.

Fanny looked angry, then subsided.

"Of course it wasn't," she explained painstakingly, in the face of such rudeness. "What do you take me for? He spoke beautifully to me. He told me that I would forget Sandor in six weeks, and that I would be very happy with a young poet. He is going to put me into a book of poems, just as Sandor put me into his picture. He knows everything, the Doctor does. Is he a doctor? Is he married? I went out to dinner with him last night—the poet, I mean. I like him very much already. We had

a real good time together. And Sandor came to see me later, and it was very sad."

Vilma choked. What, last night! And then he had come to the ball, to her. . . . The indignity of it! She felt as if she never could face Sandor again.

"And so," Fanny continued, "I have given him up. I came here to-day to tell him that it was all over, that he must not worry over me."

"You can give him up like that?"

"What can I do? When a man quits loving a woman she might as well give up. We must be fair. I've been fickle, and thrown men over who loved me. Now it's my turn. That's life. Don't you know it?"

Vilma thought of her two reckless flirtations, of her many little games of make-believe that had not always been so harmless in their effect as she could have wished, and kept silent.

Fanny closed the vanity box with a snap.

"You great ladies," she summed up judiciously, "think that love must last as long as we women would like to have it. Love is like a railway, and *you* only know two points along

the line. Once you get on board, you want to travel by express, without stop until the end is reached. But with us women of artistic temperament it's different. We are the small stations by the way: the train stops a moment, then it's off again. Occasionally it's an eating station, and the train stops a little longer. But not so very long. We never get to be the big stations where the train stops for good. I should say it would be tiresome, after a while. It's nice to change from time to time."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I'm a fool. I made up my mind last night, I changed it this morning, I've made it up again. I'll not see him. I'll not wait for him.

"It has been such a consolation to talk it all over with you, Mademoiselle," she continued, rising, buttoning her jacket, and straightening her coquettish little toque in the Venetian mirror. "You've given me such good advice, just like the Doctor, in there."

"I have not said a word."

"No? Well, anyhow, you've helped me to

think it all out. I talked it over with the poet, too. He said it was my duty, since you are going to marry . . ."

"You dared to talk about me?"

"Everybody knows you are going to marry Sandor. They say it's a great match for him."

"Everybody is mistaken."

Vilma was on the verge of hysterics. Humiliation was piled on humiliation. What! She had waded so deep into the mire to win this man—unconscious of it all.

"You had better go now," she said haughtily.

Fanny, busy with her glove, did not notice the tone of her voice. She was not observant.

"You have done so much for me," she said serenely unconscious, "and we are such very good friends now, that I will do something for you in return.

"Don't marry him," she continued impressively. "He don't love you. With all your money you'd never be happy with him. It's wiser to marry the man who loves you than to marry the man you love. I know. My mother told me that, long ago. I'm not jealous

of you, I'm jealous of that other woman, Madame . . ."

"Don't mention her name," cried Vilma, appalled.

"So then you know about her. I'm jealous of her, and so are you. You think you can take him away from her, but you can't. Give him up, just like me. He's not worth it. No man is. Go away, travel; you're rich. I must stay here, and fight it out. You can run away, and that's far easier."

Vilma had grown deadly pale.

"Are you going?" she asked. "No, I am not angry with you. You have rendered me a service—but go, go at once."

Fanny dropped her curtsey, and left the room.

Vilma Tôth slowly drew on her gloves. She looked around her, hesitated a moment when her eye fell on the door through which the Doctor had disappeared, as if she would call him to say good-by to him,—perhaps to tell him that he had been right after all,—changed her mind, moved slowly to the entrance, and softly closed

the door upon all the hopes of happiness which she had lost.

No sooner was she gone, than Dr. Nicholas rose from the depths of the Gothic chair.

"Desperate cases require desperate remedies," he chuckled to himself. "She was dangerous, she might really have defeated me in the end. Now that the field is cleared, it is time for the last act. What a blunderer you are, Dr. Nicholas; and you know nothing of women."

CHAPTER XII

THE DEVIL'S VICTORY

THE bell rang. André came hurrying through the room, disappeared in the hall, and returned after a moment.

"I have heard that bell tingling constantly this morning, André," said Dr. Nicholas. "I hope it has not disturbed Monsieur Tatray. Who is the insistent caller?"

"It is Madame Vörösss's maid, sir. She came first at ten o'clock, and I told her that Monsieur Tatray had come home late from the ball, and had left orders not to be called before half-past two. Since then she has returned four times."

"Is Monsieur Tatray awake?"

"Yes, sir, he is dressing. It is nearly three o'clock now."

"Have you packed my bag?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, André. Will you make me some

tea, and bring it to Monsieur Tatray's bedroom? I will come to see him in a moment. I am going into the studio to smoke a cigarette, and take a last look at this beautiful city."

Dr. Nicholas lighted a cigarette, took a few slow, grateful puffs, then went into the studio, leaving a thin thread of bluish gray in his wake.

As he closed the glass door behind him, the bell rang again. He hastened away to the other end of the studio, sat down in one of the large Venetian chairs there, and looked with enjoyment upon the snow-covered city, the ice-clad Donau, and the monumental bridge linking Buda to Pesth.

André, meanwhile, had once more hurried, grumbling, to the outer door, and opened it. This time it was not the maid, but her mistress.

Jolan entered unhesitatingly, and walked straight into the den, the servant following her.

"Your master is at home?" she asked curtly.

"Yes, Madame."

"Has he seen anyone this morning?"

"No, Madame."

"Has a letter been delivered for him?"

"No, Madame."

Jolan gave a sigh of relief. Then she continued:

"My maid brought word that he would be up by three o'clock. It is three now. Tell him that I wish to see him."

"He is dressing now, Madame."

"Has he been asleep ever since he came home from the ball?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Did he come home alone?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Not with Doctor Nicholas?"

"No, Madame. Dr. Nicholas came home much later. He did not go to bed at all."

"Is Doctor Nicholas here?" Jolan felt a sinking of the heart.

"Yes, Madame. He is in the studio now."

"Has he given you no letter to deliver to Monsieur Tatray?"

"No, Madame. He said just now that he was going to visit Monsieur in his bedroom."

"Tell him that I wish to see him at once—at once, do you hear? Before he sees Monsieur Tatray. Don't tell him who it is that wishes to see him."

"Very well, Madame."

André hurried into the studio. Dr. Nicholas emerged from it a moment later. He gave a start of surprise and said:

"What! You are the mysterious lady who must speak to me at once, right now?"

Jolan did not notice that he took her hand and kissed it ceremoniously. Anxiety tore at her heart.

"Always your servant," murmured the Doctor.

"Tell me at once—look me in the eyes—tell me truth. That letter? Did you deliver it?"

"I gave it to Sandor a moment ago, as soon as I could see him."

Jolan groaned.

"Did he read it?" She gasped out the words, her throat contracted, her brain reeling, her knees trembling with misery.

"He read it."

"And—and—what did he say?"

"He said nothing. He read it, then he read it again. He looked at me, but did not see me. he gazed at something far, far away. He saw it come nearer, nearer, he stretched out his arms, laughing with triumphant joy. Then he dropped them, empty, at his sides. After a while he spoke. 'Do you know what is in this letter?' he asked me. I said No, of course. I told him that I had merely been requested to hand it to him. 'Something about the portrait, no doubt?' I added. Oh, you are safe with me. I have been very discreet."

"And then?"

"He cast himself down upon the bed, buried his face in the pillows, and sobbed. I withdrew softly. I knew that he would not wish me to witness his emotion."

"He sobbed," murmured Jolan pitifully to herself.

"Yes, he sobbed, but it was not all despair. There was the ecstasy of joy in it, as well as

the hopeless grief of irretrievable loss. It was a good letter, merciful, generous, yet firm, unmistakable in its finality."

"I came here to ask you not to deliver that letter to him. I have come too late—too late.

"Is this life of ours so ordered?" she continued wistfully to herself. "Happiness—unhappiness, do these things depend upon our coming five minutes before or five minutes after three o'clock?"

"It is even so. One minute between ecstasy and despair, between gain and loss, between life and death, between eternity and annihilation."

"Too late!" Jolan repeated. "I did not sleep all night. I felt that I must wake, that I must watch, lest you would give him the letter while I slept. I believed that you would feel the influence of my will, my wish, my hope! Oh! You knew that I did not intend him to have it, to read it! I asked you to return it to me last night, and you—you pretended to misunderstand me, you threatened to give it to my husband! What is it you wish of me? It is always

you, you, since you have come into my life—always you who lure and forbid, who tempt and withhold, who order and direct; and I—I do your bidding, with no will of my own, no choice!"

"Madame Vöröss, I have acted as I considered best. I stumbled into this without desire of my own; I saw the situation, I acted for you, for him."

"Yesterday you tempted us, you showed us the road to our earthly paradise. To-day you bar us from it."

"Yesterday I thought that I had found two strong souls, daring to stand up before the world and defy it—two passions great enough, high enough, deep enough to risk all. I, too, saw your earthly paradise, I led you to its gates, I opened your eyes that you might see and know. I saw his highest inspiration in your eyes, its supreme fulfilment blazing in his. I thought I had found two master minds, and endeavored to lead them.

"Then came the reaction. Honor, respect.

. . . Faugh! All the rigamarole of small souls that dare not rely upon themselves, that live only on the consent, the approbation of the weak-minded mob—two timid, weakly loves that put self above happiness, and hid their fear and their small egoism behind empty-sounding phrases. I tempted and withheld, you say? You both did that yourselves.

"And so I resolved to undo what I had begun. That is the secret of the letter which I dictated to you. It contains the whole story of your small passion, its puny strength, and the measure of its weakness, its cowardice. You confessed in it, and in the same breath denied; you proffered and withheld, you tempted and repulsed. And as I put all of you into that letter, so did I put into it all of him. He would take his own, yet dares not. Thus shall you pass your lives, desiring yet fearing, unhappy, but—respected. Oh, yes, respected! That will be your consolation—yours and his. That man in there, sobbing softly, is the symbol of both your incomplete existences apart."

Sandor entered. Dr. Nicholas moved away.

"Stay, stay!" implored Jolan. "What shall I do?"

"You have chosen, abide by your decision. You are too puny, both of you, to soar to the heights. You are the honest wife, he is the platonic admirer. That is your measure."

He moved away into the studio. Sandor did not look at him; his eyes were riveted on Jolan.

"You have come," he stammered, "after what happened last night. Oh, Jolan, I should kneel at your feet, and ask your pardon—you, whom I honor above all other women."

"Do not reproach yourself, Sandor," she answered with infinite tenderness. "It was I who made you do it. I was weary of sorrow, of uncertainty. I must know. I was mad with jealousy. I must know that you loved me as I had dreamt you did all these years, not with the pale respect of our pretense, but with the overpowering passion of a strong man. I exulted when your jealousy flamed up, I gloried in that

terrible suspicion, because it told me all, all that I wished to know."

"Jolan! Jolan!" Sandor grasped her hand and covered it with kisses, his eyes shining with a happiness far beyond words.

"So much has happened to us during the last twenty-four hours, Sandor. There are years, centuries, in which nothing happens, and there are days, like yesterday, into which a whole lifetime is compressed. Ah, dearest, my king, at last we know."

Sandor attempted to draw her to him, but she loosened her hand from his grasp, and continued falteringly:

"It was bound to come, Sandor; even though we lose each other forever, we have loved, we have confessed, we have gazed into each other's eyes. I caused the flame to leap into life in yours, I saw it, it warmed my heart, so cold, so desolate, so lonely all these years without you! And now, my own, we must pay . . . we must part. . . ."

She faltered, hiding her face with both her

hands. From behind them she continued brokenly:

"It must be . . . we must . . . honor . . . duty. . . ."

Suddenly she cried out:

"No! No! I cannot give you up! Sandor, Sandor, I love you!"

Half fainting, she sank into his arms, lifting her distorted face to his. She clasped his head in both her hands, drew it down to her. . . . Their lips met at last. Thus they remained a long, sweet moment, motionless, silent.

Jolan suddenly remembered.

"Dr. Nicholas," she whispered. "There, in the studio."

They drew apart, smiling at each other, their hands parting reluctantly.

"Dear, what did you think when you received my letter? Had you an idea of what it contained? I tried to intercept it. That is why I came."

"Your letter? What letter?" asked Sandor, puzzled.

"The letter I wrote last night."

"I know nothing of it, Jolan. I did not receive it. What does it matter?"

"You need not pretend that you have not received it," she cooed, fondly touching his arm. "My generous lover! I am no longer ashamed of it, I no longer regret it, since it has brought us together. Oh, how I suffered after I had written it, how I wished that I could recall it! But now . . . Let us read it together."

"I swear to you, Jolan, that I know nothing of this letter. I never read it, I never saw it. . . ."

"You say it was not delivered to you? I gave it to Doctor Nicholas last night, and he told me just now . . ."

"That man! Always that man!" exclaimed Sandor furiously. "Who is he? What is he? He appears in everything, with his well-bred impertinence and his smiling air. Oh, but he shall leave my house at once!"

Jolan had stepped to the studio door and opened it. Dr. Nicholas discreetly entered the room. She held out her hand to him.

"My letter," she said briefly.

She glanced at him sharply, searchingly. His face wore a look of serene innocence.

"I must humbly beg your pardon," he said smoothly. "I forgot all about it . . . I did not remember where I had put it, and told you a fib when you asked me about it. I did not wish you to believe that I had been negligent in carrying out your command. Just now I found it in my dress-coat. Here it is."

Jolan was still studying his face, trying to read his thought, his intention. Sandor, struck by the intensity of her attitude, restrained his rising temper, and watched.

Dr. Nicholas advanced into the room, and continued:

"Happily there are letters which there is no necessity of delivering. This, I believe, is one of them. You wrote it, you did not wish Sandor to see it. I knew both these things . . . yet I succeeded in making it serve its purpose."

Jolan gazed at him intently, wonderingly, with suspicion, yet with unwilling admiration.

"Now I see," she said slowly, ponderingly.

"I wonder if you do . . . even now," said Dr. Nicholas enigmatically. He smiled a little to himself.

"But, since the letter has been found," he concluded, "I will fulfill my commission."

He took the well-filled envelope out of his breast pocket, and handed it to Sandor.

"No!" cried Jolan, "Do not open it, do not read it! Tear it up! Throw it into the fire!"

Sandor approached the hearth, and obeyed her implicitly. Then, turning to Dr. Nicholas, he said shortly, rudely,

"Are you going?"

"My train leaves at four." He consulted his watch. "Fifteen minutes more, and then I will take my leave. Madame, I must again express my regret for the discomfort I have caused you by my neglect. The letter might have fallen into other hands . . ."

"I cannot allow you to question the contents of that letter," broke in Sandor, now seriously

angry, "or this lady's motives in writing it. I am bound to her by ties of the purest respect. There was nothing in that letter to justify you in speaking as you did. Anyone could see it. It was just an ordinary, everyday letter. No one knows that better than yourself."

"You are quite right," said Dr. Nicholas quietly. "I am sorry to have seemed to question its contents. It was not my intention, but I apologize."

"You will be late for your train," said Sandor.

"Once more, my excuses. Do not accompany me, I beg of you. André can see me to the door. Good-bye."

He bowed again, then turned and went out into the hall. The moment the door had closed Jolan softly nestled in Sandor's arms, her head against his breast.

"I am sorry after all," she said, "that he failed to deliver that letter. I would give a great deal if I could conjure it up from the ashes."

"But what was in this mysterious letter?"

"The history of all our love, Sandor, of all our sorrows, of all our longings. All my life, and yours. . . . All but this ending, which is the true beginning. . . ."

"And now," she continued dreamily, pressing closer against him, and staring into the fire, "now it is burned,—my first and only love letter. I would have loved to read it over with you—you and I together. He said there was no need of it now, but yes, there is. I should have liked to watch you reading my confession, and to see the impression it made on you reflected in your dear face, shining in your dark eyes as you lifted them from the page to me. I should have liked to read it again, to remember everything, the pain, the struggle to keep from spreading my wings and soaring with you towards the sunlight, the pitiful endeavor to keep my hold upon small things, and then to forget it all in the glorious ecstasy of our happiness."

She glanced up at him with all her heart in

her starry eyes, confidingly, his forever. Again he stooped, again their lips met.

There was a rattle at the knob of the door into the hall. It opened, and admitted Dr. Nicholas, bag in hand, his fur coat hanging loose from his shoulders, a travelling hat on his head. He dropped the bag, took off his hat, came forward, and said:

"Excuse me again—really, I do not know what is the matter with me to-day. Just now I gave you a letter. . . . It was not yours. I must have given you a coal bill, instead. They follow me all over the world. Here is the letter, beyond any possibility of further error."

Jolan snatched it from his hand, opened it and read it with Sandor. His arm stole around her waist, her head sank on his shoulder. They had forgotten the man standing there, the man who had brought them together. The world had ceased to exist for them. They were alone in a dreamland of their own . . . they stood before the gate of their earthly paradise. It beckoned them.

Slowly, softly, they began to move across the room, his arm guiding her, her head confidingly pillowed upon his shoulder. A great light was in their eyes.

The door of the studio closed softly upon them.

Dr. Nicholas had watched them closely, hidden in the shadow. Now he took up his bag, put on his hat, smiled his discreet, enigmatic smile, waved his hand towards the door through which they had disappeared, and said, with infinite satisfaction:

"Good work!"

THE END